

Sunday between 7th and 13th August [19]

John 6:35, 41-51

Bread, it seems, is a popular medium for God to use in performing miracles. 2 weeks ago we were reminded of the use of bread in a multiplication miracle. Last week's readings were concerned with heavenly bread, both physically and spiritually. We heard about Jesus identifying himself as the bread of heaven. This week our gospel continues to discuss this theory of Jesus as the bread of heaven.

This metaphor for Jesus as bread is one he uses often about himself so what was it about bread that Jesus particularly identifies with? We know when he refers to himself as shepherd that he is talking of his particular type of leadership, a hands-on approach which involves knowing the character of each and every one of his charges, relying not only on them to follow but also sometimes needing to seek the lost and rescue the strayed. When Jesus described himself as the lamb of God, here he speaks of his sacrifice, like the lambs sacrificed in the temple on behalf of their owners, to be an atonement for sin, to put the person who offers the sacrifice into a right relationship with God.

But what about bread? Well, for the Jewish people, bread was a staple food, a bit like it is for us. For many of us bread is one of those things that needs to be constantly replenished in the store cupboard, there is an expectation in our family that there will always be bread. We have bread to accompany meals, bread as the basis for meals and it's the go to food if we're a bit hungry between meals. Bread is the sort of food that when you run out it can almost be anxiety inducing until arrangements are made for getting some more. In far eastern cultures rice has a similar role as a staple food, in parts of Africa it is grits, but for the Jewish people it is bread.

So, by speaking of himself as bread for life, Jesus was taking on these attributes. He was saying of himself, I am what you need to live, I am a fundamental staple for healthy life. Without me you become a little anxious as you wonder when you will next encounter me, in order to live life in abundance you need for me to be a part of it. Just like you eat bread every day, so you need to partake in relationship with me constantly, day by day.

He emphasised his point at the last supper with the physical teaching aid of an actual loaf of bread. As he broke the bread in order to allow others to share it, so he described how his own body needed to be broken to fulfil its purpose. Then he encouraged his disciples to repeat the action of sharing bread as a memorial to him, but even more than that, as a reminder of what he had done for them and indeed for us all.

And so they did, and so we continue to do. We share bread and wine after giving thanks to God over them and reminding ourselves of the circumstances of that last supper and Jesus' life and work through this Eucharist service week by week. That physical act of sharing a piece of bread alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ brings home to us week by week the same understanding that Jesus gave to his first disciples, the need for the fundamentals in life and that Jesus was the fulfilment of our spiritual hunger.

When we set apart bread and wine in this way in Church we make it holy, yes, in the true sense of the word holy, we set it apart from day to day bread and ask God's blessing on it as we partake in our spiritual meal with Jesus. But our partaking is not only in the consumption of bread. Jesus did not say this was the only way to meet God, the only way to partake in him, he asked us to do it when we meet as a church but there is so much more.

We partake in the heavenly bread when we feed our hunger for learning and growth through reading scripture. We do that during our church services but we really need to be doing that by ourselves also. Catching snippets of scripture proscribed in the lectionary is not the same as intentionally reading a biblical book. So to partake in Jesus we need to meet him in reading scripture.

We partake in the heavenly bread when we feed our spirits with prayer to the one who calls out to us. Of course we pray in church too, and in a number of ways. But in church our prayers are led by someone else, either through the prayers that have already been written down or the ones offered by an individual as prayers for the people. We can find moments in the silence to commune with God but to really pray we need to find time by ourselves, in the quiet, where we can concentrate, to offer to God the concerns and joys of our hearts. To partake in Jesus we need to talk to him in prayer.

We partake in the heavenly bread when we share it. Jesus never preached follow me in isolation, on your own terms. Everything he did, was done in community with others to encourage us and keep us on track. When Jesus said follow me, he wasn't talking about face book or twitter where with the flick of a switch you can be informed of the progress of another person through the messages they send. For Jesus following him meant literally leaving home, getting out into the community with him, mixing with the people you had until now avoided, being seen for who you are and what you believe in. To partake in Jesus we need to be honest and intentional Christians.

That is the other thing we must remember about bread, of course, unlike the metaphor of the shepherd, the bread will not come looking for us. Unlike the lamb, the bread cannot sacrifice itself. The bread requires us to reach out and partake. We must want it and receive it and we have every opportunity to refuse it. Jesus' gift, described as bread from heaven, seems like a no-brainer. Of course we want to be fed and satisfied in our spiritual lives, of course we want to receive the fundamentals required for a life lived in Christ. The question is do we want to do what it takes to receive that gift? Will we make time to encounter God in scripture and prayer, will we identify ourselves publicly as Christian and find ways to work for God in our community. Will we commit to being part of a Christian community where we encourage others and accept encouragement from them? That is how we, metaphorically, reach out to take the bread from heaven. That is what we come to be commissioned to do each time we take the Eucharistic bread at the altar rail.

We are all invited to the feast, Jesus said, "here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat". May you eat of it and be satisfied, today and always.