

18th August 2024
Ephesians 5.15-20
John 6.51-58

Bread for Body, Mind and Spirit

Today we come to the end of a Lectionary detour. For, although we are still in the Year of Mark, those who have set our Sunday readings, used the world over, have given us a month in John focussing just on chapter six and the picture of Jesus as the *Bread of Life*. An image that obviously spoke very powerfully to Jesus' original hearers, men and women whose lives as subsistence farmers literally depended on their daily bread. So, this was, and is, a powerful metaphor and one that speaks to body, mind and spirit.

Last month part of our Elders' Away Day was to share a lunchtime meal together and as we walked back to the church, I heard some of our number discuss the changing fads around bread. I think over lunch only sourdough bread had been offered with the soup which, I think I'm right in saying, some felt a touch disappointing. And then I heard some comments about Brioch Buns and whether you should ever put a beefburger between them!

I suspect bread is important as a staple the world over. And Jesus, in John 6, picks up on its natural centrality to life and equates faith in God as equally vital to our existence.

Yet, let's start today with an affirmation of how important the Body is in the message and mission of our Lord. Bread, not just as a spiritual metaphor but as a daily necessity for there is a certain *physicality* to Jesus which makes an over-spiritualising of his words mistaken.

I think the Iona hymn puts it really rather well when it talks of Jesus *feeding mouths as well as preaching*.

Of course, he inherits that *whole of life* mentality from his Jewish roots which were never so heavenly minded that they became of no earthly use.

Just think of Harvest Festival. Here at AFC, we'll be having ours in just over a month's time and it's just one service. But that wasn't enough at The Temple. They had three. In the spring there was the festival of Pesach held during the first fruits of the Barley Harvest. In the summer Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, and bringing it all to a close, the Festival of Tabernacles in the autumn called Sukkot. Not for them just a once a year singing of, *We plough the fields and scatter*. Of

course not, because Jesus' society was dominated by agriculture in all its forms.

Although Jesus refused to be tied down and labelled as a Political Messiah, it would just be shortsighted of us not to pick up how important was the political, ethical and radical elements at the core of his teaching. Jesus never taught faith in terms of a divide between sacred and secular, for him it all belonged together, hence the words of that hymn from Iona.

So, as he took tea with Zacchaeus in Jericho he must have spoken about the link between faith and personal wealth because the result was Zacchaeus became the town's biggest benefactor as a result.

Faced with a hungry crowd of 5000 he reads the situation as it really was, stops preaching and feeds them.

When entrapped by the Scribes and Pharisees Jesus clearly shows his support for the taxation system and all the good it could potentially do as he says *Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's*.

And when his disciples were criticized for crushing grain on a Sabbath he tells those who overly spiritualised life to wake up and recognise that the body needed looking after too.

In all of this there is the constant theme that God longs for us to enjoy physical wholeness and have enough daily bread, amongst other things. It's the reason why our Partnership in Mission Committee are promoting Toilet Twinning as this month's mission offering. It's not unholy to talk about toilets in church – and perhaps that should have been the title of today's sermon!

Bread for the Body, Mind and Spirit.

Now, Jesus says at least two things about bread: in the Wilderness during his temptations as he stares at rocks feeling hungry, he says *we do not live by bread alone* whilst describing himself in today's reading as the *Bread of Life*.

So, whilst never minimalizing that good and Godly desire that all should be physically fed, Jesus pushes the imagery into metaphor by describing the gospel in terms of a spiritual meal that satisfies the soul.

William Williams, of course a Welshman with a name like that, was the 18th century author of the much-loved hymn *Guide me o thou great Redeemer*. By the time it was published in 1762 he'd been on quite a journey himself. Converted in a Calvinistic Independent Church he'd sought ordination as an Anglican only to finally end up serving as a Welsh Methodist minister.

Williams wrote his best-known hymn about a journey, a journey of faith and he based it on the forty year one undertaken by the Israelites through the Wilderness. So, he talks both of the Pillars of cloud and fire that led them, and the Bread of Heaven as in the daily manna that fed them. It's a hymn that perfectly blends the idea that God provides for both the spiritual and the material. He guides us in our faith and blesses us with physical nourishment, and so the hymn soars with the words: *Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven Feed me now and ever more.*

The idea of finding spiritual nourishment in God has an honoured place among us. It's there in the hymns we sing, the sermons we listen to, the prayers we read or say, the Bible Study groups we attend, the books we study and the fellowship we share. We long for local churches to be places where we are, as it were, spiritually fed.

In a fast-moving world that sometimes go at such a pace that only the superficial can be coped with, churches need to serve up a slow cooked meal that can really nourish and sustain us. We are fed as we ask questions, seek for meaning, explore sacred scripture, linger together in prayerful silence. This is soul food, and we all need it, because we all need Jesus, *the Bread of Life.*

So, how can we tie together our two readings this morning, one from John and the other from Ephesians?

I'd like to suggest as a final thought in today's sermon that the theme of *nourishment* stretches across both.

In Ephesians we read: *Speak to one another in psalms, hymns and songs. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.* Words that should surely be pinned up in every choir vestry!

Shakespeare, in 12th Night, put it this way: *If music be the food of love play on...*

In other words, we so often find our souls nourished by music, and in church that gives expression to the hymns and songs we sing and the anthems we hear. As one commentator on Ephesians says as he ponders this lovely verse: Music, poetry, images and symbols *they take us to boundaries and beyond.* They nourish our souls.

Hymnos, in Greek, literally means a *song of praise.* And hymns have long had a place in worship, from the psalms sung in the temple to the hymns mentioned in the New Testament, like the one based on Philippians 2 (alas its tune was never written down), to the Plainsong of the Medieval Church or the introduction of congregational hymns by Luther and Isaac Watts. Even today we'll sing a hymn written by our good friend John Campbell, penned just this summer for churches

to use with today's readings. Hymn writing is alive and well.

And that, I believe is immensely important because as the newly published Methodist hymnbook is called, we really are in the business of *Singing the Faith*.

Now, I say this with just a touch of hesitancy, that it's probable that most people learn more about the language and ideas of faith from hymns rather than sermons! There's no need to say 'Amen' to that, but your gentle smiles say it all.

It's clear as people have been submitting favourite hymns to me over recent months that this blending of words and music has been one of their greatest teachers and has nourished them on their journey of faith.

I wouldn't want to say this is always the case, but those of us who have the privilege of visiting care homes and leading a service have often witnessed that residents whose conversation is much restricted because of dementia, can often come alive when we sing a hymn as they remember every word. Our prayer is that these truths, perhaps even learnt in Sunday School days will still be nourishing the soul so many decades after.

All of us need nourishment, both for the body and the soul.

We remember Jesus as the Bread of Life – the one who feed their mouths as well as preaching. We rejoice that faith feeds our souls as we both read of Jesus and sing of God.

I must close.

I remember, back in 1997 listening to Desert Island Discs as Sue Lawley interviewed John Cleese. Of course, it was a fascinating piece of radio, and it had its moments. And one of those for me came at the end when Cleese was asked what was the favourite track he'd like to take with him and he said it was Pietro Mascagni's *Easter Hymn*. It's a wonderful piece of music that starts softly and rises and rises with a joy filled intensity proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. I found that programme the other day on Catch Up and this is how John Cleese introduced it, he said: *I have a sense there is something going on which isn't just to do with the material world. I need something to keep my spirit alive and the Easter Hymn would do that.*

May it be so, for us all, in the name of Jesus, the Bread of Life, who offers nourishment for both body and soul. Amen