
The Bread of Life

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 4 August 2024

Exodus 16:2-15 • Ephesians 4:1-16 • John 6:24-35



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Jesus is the bread of life. These are familiar words, from this passage of John's Gospel which we're looking at today. Bread is both a concept and a reality which goes all through the Bible. Bread is food; bread is sustenance; bread is the difference between living and dying.

Prisoners traditionally received bread and water; it was the very minimum to keep them alive. Man does not live by bread alone. Jesus at the well told the Samaritan woman that he can give her the water of life — so Jesus is both the bread of life and the water of life. All we need comes from Jesus. He is the bread of life, giving us the bread of heaven.

Bread is blessed and broken and shared at the table, whether the homely kitchen table or the altar of the Lord. Bread is slang for money: “Hey man, you got any bread?” Bread is the staff of life. “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” The Bible is full of such images.

There is so much meaning in bread, and yet it is so simple. Every culture has its own bread, its own staple. In Western societies, it is white bread, wheat bread, French bread — baguettes! Rolls. Scones. Muffins. According to a website I just saw, “There are more than 3200 officially recognized types of bread in Germany according to the “German Institute of Bread”, the Deutsches Brotinstitut.¹ The Italians have noodles. The Chinese have char siu bao. The Indians have naan. And rice is also the bread of India, China, Japan and many other places. You have it at every meal.

And fortunately for some of us, there is now gluten-free bread. This is a blessing, since bread is such a big part of most people’s diets.

I’m just having a bit of fun, but you see how important bread is to our various human cultures around the world.

And Jesus says he is the bread of life. Jesus is giving us the very essence of our faith, the very basis of Christianity. He could not speak more plainly than this. The centre of our faith is our Lord. Without him, we are nothing. With him, we can be and can have everything. Those who come to Jesus will never be hungry or thirsty. Jesus is the key to living in this world and living eternally in the next world.

This scene takes place right after Jesus performs the miracle of feeding the five thousand, when a few loaves and fishes provided meals for an enormous crowd. Now we see why Jesus performed this miracle. It was not just to feed a bunch of people. They would have gone off and found food for themselves if Jesus hadn’t done it. They had fed themselves before, and they would do it again; so Jesus didn’t give them anything they couldn’t get without him, although he did it in a miraculous way. Rather, Jesus used their hunger and the opportunity to satisfy it to prepare them for the lesson in today’s Gospel.

After performing the miracle, Jesus left with his disciples and went back across the lake to Capernaum. The crowd eventually found him there. But why were they following him? Was it because of the miracle? Were they following a holy man, looking for enlightenment? or were they just looking out for another free meal? Jesus see their true purpose, and tells them,

You are looking for me because you ate the bread and had all you wanted, not because you understood my miracles. Do not work for food that spoils; instead, work for the food that lasts for eternal life. This is the food which

¹ <http://breadopedia.com/germany-bread-types>, accessed 1 August 2024.

the Son of Man will give you, because God, the Father, has put his mark of approval on him. (John 6:26-27)

The people do not yet understand Jesus' teaching. Food is good; food is necessary for life; but there is a nourishment beyond that which only Jesus can provide. The crowds pick up on his line about working for food, and ask him what God wants them to do. Then Jesus gives them the key to life:

What God wants you to do is to believe in the one he sent. (v29)

That's all that is necessary.

But the people press him for another miracle. Not yet realising who he is, and still fixated on literal food, they ask him if he can do what Moses did, when he gave them manna in the wilderness. Jesus corrects them: it was not Moses who gave them this food; it was God. And then he reveals that God has given them something else as well, food which will last them for a lifetime: Jesus, the very bread of life.

Later, when Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper, he again offers himself as food. Bread and wine become flesh and blood. Feed on me, he says, for my flesh is true meat and my blood is true drink. We understand this metaphorically, again going back to bread being the essential staple of our earthly diets, and Jesus being the essential staple of our heavenly eternal life.

The bread analogy suggests something else. Because bread is a staple, eaten not just on special occasions but every day, it tells us that Jesus is also with us every day. To love Jesus means to have an ongoing relationship which affects our entire lives, every day of our lives. We commune with Jesus in a special way when we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Eucharist, but Jesus is just as present to us when we're working or walking, speaking or sleeping. Some part of us should always be aware of our Lord. That is the meaning of praying constantly, as Paul tells us to do in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:17). Most of us don't go more than a few hours without food, during the day at least; and we shouldn't go very long without a consciousness of Christ either. We may continually feed on our Lord Christ, and be, as he says, never hungry and never thirsty (John 6:35). And as eating is a lifelong habit, so should living with Christ be. Thanks be to God.