

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

BREAD

2nd Aug 2015

Psalm 78:23-29

John 6:24-35

Did you have your toast this morning? I didn't, but then I think toast is overrated as a foodstuff. I would rather have bread fresh and soft and yeasty. But toast is a staple in many breakfasts and if you stay in a B and B or a hotel it will inevitably find its way onto your table. It is just one of the things that we can do with bread – make it hot and crispy. We can also fry it – in the full Scottish breakfast – or make sandwiches. We can dip it in egg and make French toast, or soak it in milk and egg and sugar and raisins and cinnamon and bake it into a bread and butter pudding, or we can make it into croutons for soup! Yesterday at the Highland games the church soup was served with what is essentially a form of quick bread – scones. Today the Laggan picnic will serve rolls with burgers or hot dogs in them. Are you feeling hungry yet? We do use a lot of bread in our lives! In church bread always has associations with communion, of course, and reminds us of Jesus' body broken for us, and that he is, as we read today, the bread of life.

Our Old Testament reading this morning was a re-telling of the giving of manna in the wilderness – the bread of heaven. But bread was important to the story of God's people even before that. The reason that they were in the wilderness was because they had come out of Egypt and the reason that they had gone to Egypt in the first place was, of course, because in the days of Joseph there had been a tremendous famine. And a famine meant no bread. Lack of bread had brought them to Egypt and lack of bread was suggesting to at least some of the Israelites that they had better return there when God provided his own kind of bread to sustain them.

Bread features in the stories of the prophets – because she feeds Elijah, the widow of Zarephath always has enough flour to go on feeding herself and her son. In Jeremiah's day the severity of the siege of Jerusalem is measured by how expensive grains for making bread become. And then in the New Testament one of the first stories we have is of Jesus' temptation on the wilderness, where, fasting and hungry, he looks at the small round stones and is tempted to turn them into small round rolls of bread. But he doesn't, because, as he says, "People cannot live by bread alone, but by every word which God speaks."

That is the same point which we see him making again today, this time speaking to the crowd. Jesus has just fed the five thousand or so with the five loaves and two fish provided by the nameless small boy. Afterwards, he went up into the hills to pray alone while the disciples set sail for Capernaum. It was then that during a stormy night Jesus came them on the water. But in the morning the crowd just know that the boat has gone and Jesus has gone too, so they set off to Capernaum as well. And when they catch up with Jesus he takes one look at them and knows why they have come – it is because

they got a free lunch the day before. They haven't come because of what he taught them, they haven't come even because they have recognised that the extraordinary things he is doing are signs, pointers to who he is. No, they have come because they think that if they stick with him they will no longer have to work for their living – Jesus can just magically provide for them.

But Jesus did not come to make beggars of the world. This is the same problem that aid agencies can face when trying to help people in immediate crisis: how to provide without setting those helped into a cycle of pauperism. I have a friend who until recently was coordinating TEAR Fund's work in South Sudan. It was her first experience of doing development work in a Christian country: previously she had worked in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, in Yemen and in Nepal. Earlier this year we met up and she told me that South Sudan would never get itself together, never rise from the extreme poverty that exists there, because it is a Christian country. When I asked what that meant, she said that in other places aid agencies, especially Christian aid agencies, have to justify what they are doing, demonstrate how it is going to help people stand on their own feet, how they are going to work themselves out of a job. But in that Christian Country the gates were open to aid coming from all parts of the Western world, and it was not coordinated, and it was mainly focussed on giving for the now rather than working for the future. My friend was very frustrated, because she knows that Christian charity should raise people up, not confirm them as beggars.

Jesus did not come to make beggars of the world, or of his own people. He did not come to give bread and fish each day to a crowd who would otherwise have to work for their living. He came to bring the bread from heaven, the bread which endures for eternal life. And he tells the people so.

But they do not understand. They ask for a sign from him so that they might believe in him, and they hint that the sign given to their ancestors was indeed bread, it was that manna in the wilderness of which we read in the Psalm. How manipulative we humans can be, and how tunnel-visioned! Jesus had been teaching and healing, with them day after day, he had already provided them food when, on a one-off, they were hungry, and they dare to ask for another sign and try to use that request to get Jesus to do what they want! And how similar we are to them. How often we ignore the things God has done and is doing, sometimes the signposts he is giving us, and try to get him to do things our way. And our way is never for the best compared to God's way. It wouldn't really have been good for these people to quit their jobs or their subsistence farming and have Jesus feed them day after day – what reason would they have then to get out of bed in the morning. There was very little unemployment in Jesus' day – although there was another evil, namely slavery – but God has made us in such a way that we need a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to get out into the world, a reason to interact with other people and to get into the world to see what God has done there. The old proverb “Satan finds work for idle hands” is not entirely wrong.

But you can't outmanoeuvre Jesus. That's something we might bear in mind when we try to persuade ourselves that God is always going to agree with what we want. You can't outmanoeuvre Jesus. He takes their repeated insistence on feeding to talk again about how he is the real nourishment that God sends. And so again we are right back with the story of the temptation in the wilderness, when Jesus quotes the Scripture that “People cannot live by bread alone but by every word which God speaks.” God is not just about providing for our physical needs. When there is no other way, as there wasn't

when the people were wandering in the wilderness, he is quite able to do so. Ask Elijah, who was fed by the ravens, or the widow of Zarephath, whose flour did not run out, or, of course the five thousand who Jesus fed. But God's real provision for us is in Jesus.

Jesus had fed these people and he hoped that they would take this as a sign that God had sent him, rather than as a sign that the work-free holidays had arrived. He didn't want people to look at him and wonder what was in it for them, but to listen to him and then act on what he taught them. He wanted them to love their enemies and turn the other cheek, to live as God's chosen, redeemed people, and he still does.

It is still a human predisposition constantly to ask "What is in it for me?" And people do ask it of Jesus and of our Christian faith. And those of us who have set out to follow Jesus know that in fact there are many blessings and benefits which we have from it, not least the benefit of God's presence, and the assurance that in Jesus we are made right with God for this world and the world to come. But we don't follow Jesus just for what we can get, because if we do, then we will soon find that we are not actually following Jesus at all. If we follow Jesus only for what we can get from him, then we are kidding ourselves.

Jesus wanted the people to follow him for himself, because he was sent by God because he is God's Son. And he still wants that from us. If you go on one of the many signed walks around here, and are unfamiliar with the route, you have to keep your eyes peeled and looking forward to find the next way-marker, whether it is a picture of a wildcat or a coloured band on a post or a signpost with a word and an arrow. You can't keep your eyes fixed on your shoes, or your phone (!) or decide to follow wherever looks prettiest at each turn, not if you want to be able to find your way to your destination or round the loop back to the start. In the same way we cannot follow Jesus if we have our eyes on ourselves. Following Jesus brings immense blessings to us, but we cannot do it for selfish reasons, seeking to get all we can from God. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that we are to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." When we do that we will listen to what Jesus says, seek out his words as we have them written for us – isn't it great that we don't have to take boats and cross a lake to hear Jesus speak? If you think of it that way, maybe you will want to open your Bible more often! And when we fix our eyes on him, we will find that as often as not he leads us to work for the good of others, rather than for ourselves.

The crowd had a lot to learn about following Jesus. There was more to it than chasing him across a lake. And we always have more to learn about following Jesus as well. But if we ask God to help us rid ourselves of the habit of seeking what is in it for us, then we will have taken a good first step on the road to becoming disciples. Amen.