

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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BREAD OF LIFE

26th February 2017

Exodus 16:1-8, 13-15
John 6:25-35

One way of getting into a Bible passage is to imagine yourself in the place of one of the people involved. The passage we have read about Jesus being the bread of life follows from the well-known story of the feeding of the 5000. Why don't we listen to what might be the disciple Philip's take on that episode?

He really could be an aggravating man at times!

"Philip, where are we going to find enough food for all these people?"

They weren't even asking to be fed! We ourselves were hungry. We hadn't eaten for quite a while just then. Our supplies were never constant, and our periods of plenty, even feasting, were interspersed with times when there was no choice but to fast. I wanted us to be a little more sparing with food when we had it, but somehow that never happened. Inevitably, when I'd try to conserve – hoard, the others said – I'd turn and find someone wolfing it down in a defiant, in-you-face kind of way. It became a joke. Jesus would just smile and say that if God has sent times of fasting we should gladly make use of them. He was like that.

We were hungry. He must have been hungry too. He knew perfectly well we had no food. "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" he asked next.

There were a lot of people. I watched them stumbling, swarming, hobbling, racing up the hill towards us. It was a sea of head-cloths, simple bleached linen and sombre grey stripes. Here and there a flash of colour glowed brightly. Because of the shape of the hill I couldn't see the paths by the lakeside, where they must be coming from. I just saw a mass of humanity surging up the bare hillside towards us. And I had no idea where we would find food for these people. I said so. I put it in financial terms, just to annoy Jesus. He was always telling us that the shekel was no real answer to any real question. So I answered in terms of denarius, just another way of saying "shekel" to him. I wanted him to know that I thought that this was not a real question, and that I was in no mood for jokes.

He understood all right, but he wouldn't be drawn into discussion of the question right then. Instead he turned away to the other eleven and with raised eyebrows and outstretched hand opened up the question to them.

God bless Andrew! He is nothing like as outspoken as his brother, and he usually tries to get out of these tense situations. He avoids discussion as much as possible – but he gets things done. While the rest were scratching their heads or looking at the ground he scanned the crowd. I couldn't think what he was looking for, and before I could ask him he launched himself down the hillside, tacking his way against

the tide of people flowing up against him. I followed him with my eyes, sometimes losing sight of him altogether as the swell of the multitude concealed him. Then, half-way down the hill I saw him stop and bend down. After that he turned and again forced a passage through the people, coming up the slope this time. It wasn't until he came close to us that I realised he wasn't alone. A small, shabby boy was following in his wake.

The boy held a small basket. Andrew said "Here is a boy with five small loaves and two fish, but what is that among so many?" His eyes lifted briefly to Jesus' face and then fell to the ground?

I was still cross with Jesus. I remember thinking that Andrew had turned the tables nicely. He'd shown the impossibility of coming by enough food for ourselves, there in the wilderness, never mind the thousands that were swarming around us. We couldn't even beg or borrow from the crowd, because they hadn't come prepared for a picnic. I wanted Jesus to admit it was a silly idea on his part.

Instead he bent over and spoke softly to the boy, who nodded his head. Then Jesus told us to get the people sitting in groups of about a hundred. I hesitated. I wanted to argue or question. I wanted to know why we were doing this, what was going on. But Jesus had his "no questions" face on, so I knew it would do no good. I followed the others, tagging on behind Bartholomew and trying to make order from the chaos confronting us.

It wasn't easy. Very few people knew most of we disciples by sight. They thought we were some of them, and they didn't see at all why they should do as we told them. After the first few hundreds had been organised it was easier, but more than once I thought we might come to blows over it.

You know what happened next. It was the most amazing thing. I had half a small loaf in my hands but no matter how often I tore off half of that to give to someone ("Give them decent-sized pieces" Jesus had whispered) I still had half a loaf. And I could see that not only was the same thing happening for the other disciples; but any of the crowd who tried to share the bread they received found that giving didn't deny them any.

Jesus acted as if it were all a normal occurrence. He was in a provoking mood that day! When the crowd got excited he simply walked out on them and sent us down to the lake. Everyone was left to make what they could or would of what had happened, and thousands of different versions of what had happened must have been re-told in the streets and homes in the lakeside towns that night.

God's bread given to the people in the time of the exodus was a sign of his love and provision for them, despite their continual complaining and grumbling. When Jesus fed the multitude with the five loaves and two fish, he too was showing God's love and provision for his people, for those who would come to him and listen to his word. And yet it was not enough. The manna did not stop the people grumbling and challenging God through Moses, and Jesus' feeding of the crowds did not stop them asking him "What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe in you?" (v:30) I am reminded of Jesus parable of the rich man and Lazarus when the rich man implores Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn people of the torment his sins have landed him in, and Abraham says "If they do not believe Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:31)

The point of the feeding is not to convince people, because there is nothing on earth that will be the final and convincing proof that there is a God, and that God is love and that Jesus is God's Son and should be heeded. There are good indications, but nothing that will once and for all convince the person who does not want to be convinced. Then as now, there is always an element of faith needed. The people of Israel had to believe Moses about the manna; they had to believe and to act, to gather it when it appeared, not wait till later in the day. They had to believe him when he told them that when kept till the Sabbath it would remain fresh, even though on other days it went off quite quickly. Faith and action were needed if God's gift of manna was to feed them.

Jesus knew that his feeding of the crowd had wakened in some minds the hope and idea that they might never have to work again, or live the uncertain, hand-to-mouth existence that was the norm for the majority. There were some people who thought that the good times had arrived. They had, of course, but not in the way that they were thinking. He hadn't come to make people idle, but to give them life.

When Jesus called himself the bread of life, he was consciously harking back to that time in the desert. He was reminding the people that God provided for them then, and telling them that his presence among them was God providing for them now – providing his presence, providing something better than manna, (which had a very short shelf-life,) providing the sustenance that leads to eternal life. Later in his life, as we know and can never forget, he took bread and called it his body, then broke it to show how he would give his life for ours. In that act he would take all the symbolism and promise of the exodus, when God passed over his people and spared them and set them free to live, and he would apply it to himself and to what he was doing for the world.

“I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” The promise is real, and is enticing. He promises security and fulfilment, he promises what we need to live, and to attain his promise we have to come to him, and keep coming, keep staying with him. The crowd who ate the bread and the fish would be hungry again a few hours later. They came to Jesus for a short while, and then went away again. When they returned, they were looking for a sign, for something to convince them that Jesus was worth following. But Jesus invites us to come to him and to never go away. He asks us to align our lives with him, and go where he leads us as we live in his way, loving the loveless, turning the other cheek, forgiving, giving and working to bring in his kingdom here and now. His promise is that when we do that we won't need to look for signs and wonders to convince us, because we will have his presence, satisfying us body and soul. “The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Amen.

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