

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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BREAD OF LIFE

22nd July 2018

Exodus 16:9-21

John 6:22-40

Earlier in the service we looked at various breads. Delicious stuff, in so many forms, and nearly all of us have our favourites. In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus, when sought by those who had been part of the crowd of five thousand who were fed by him, declared, "I am the bread of life." I *am* the bread, note, not I *give* the bread. He had given bread, ordinary bread miraculously multiplied so that all could be filled, but that was just something he had done, it wasn't what he was all about. I am the bread of life.

Three weeks ago, we read about God naming himself "I am who I am," and noted that the I Am name of God, while ambiguous in the extreme, is an invitation to discover God for ourselves. It is an invitation to draw close. We can't label God or say we know about God unless we get to know God. And there is always more waiting for us to discover as we come deeper and deeper into our relationship with God. When Jesus made statements using the phrase "I am" he did it deliberately in an attempt to help us come into that relationship with God by looking at him and finding in him aspects of God that we can relate to.

So, what did Jesus mean when he said that he is the bread of life? What did he mean about himself and about his heavenly Father? He talks about himself as the real bread, the true bread, as opposed to the temporary bread that you need to eat time after time after time. But the thing about bread in Jesus' culture, which we, who live with a rich abundance of food could forget, is that it was the staple of every meal. Bread, flat bread, like pitta bread or naan, was what filled you, what nourished you. There was no alternative for the majority of people. Some of us sometimes go on diets, for our health or to lose weight, and we can pick and choose our foods. Sometimes people choose to eat without flour or without carbohydrates, we could decide to cut our fats or sugars, and that is a choice we can make. Not in Jesus' day. Everyone ate bread, and for some people that was all that they would eat some days. It was literally the staff of life. Without bread you would die.

And Jesus said, "I am the bread of life."

All bread gives life, so Jesus distinguished between "the food that perishes" and "the food that endures for eternal life." (v:27) All of the various forms of bread we looked at earlier are the food that perishes. You know that. If you don't eat bread fairly soon, within days it begins to grow green spots and then they spread, and your loaf or roll is no longer a healthy food for you. When God gave the people manna in the desert – the story which crowd remind Jesus of – they had to eat it that same day, or by morning there would be maggots in it – which is far from an appetising thought. Food that perishes indeed.

But Jesus is the bread of life.

All bread gives life, or maybe we should say all staple food give life. When, a life-time ago, I worked for a summer in Irian Jaya with people who were recording an as-yet unrecorded language and translating the Bible into it, one of the books they were working on was John's gospel. It was the second book they tackled after Mark. When they came to this statement, this "I am" of Jesus, they had to think hard how to translate it. That language had no word for bread, and they had no word because they had no bread. The staple of the people was sweet potatoes, and with a very restricted diet, for many people that would be all they ate most days, with meat only for celebrations. There was no word for bread, but there was a word for sweet potato, of course – *sumburu* – and so, that is what they used. They had Jesus say, "I am the sweet potato of life." It is not what he said – Jesus may never have encountered a sweet potato - but it is what he meant, for that *sumburu*- dependant culture. I am your staple diet. I am what keeps you alive. Without me you will die. I am essential to you.

The idea of having one staple food on which we totally depend has left us in this culture and this country. And maybe that is as well, practically speaking. The history of the awful suffering during what we call the Irish potato famine (the Irish refer to it as the Great Hunger) during the 1840s shows what can happen when a people depend on one food and then the crop fails them. Ireland lost up to a quarter of the population during those years of hunger, some by emigration as well as many by death. Maybe we don't want to depend on one food.

But maybe too, we should be careful that this A la Carte way of thinking about our physical diet does not spill over into the whole of our lives. Maybe we should be careful that we don't assume that just because we can choose to eat bread or not, or to eat any foodstuff or not, and in most cases, allergies apart, no harm will come to us, so we can also choose to draw near to God or not. The people who heard Jesus speak would not have made the mistake of thinking that, even if they didn't understand or agree with his words.

Maybe in our physical lives we don't want to depend on one food, but Jesus says that he is the bread of life. He will not fail us, he is constant and reliable. He is the true bread from heaven who gives life to the world. By calling himself the bread of life, he is helping us to see God. God is so big, the whole concept of God is so ungraspable, the more that we think about it. But Jesus, who shows us God, says that he is the bread of life. God is about life. He is not about death and punishment, as many people have feared, but about life. God gives us life and sustains our life and is essential for our life, because he gives us eternal life. Eternal life is not just life in heaven, but life and liveliness which begins here and now and continues through the great change that we call death. God is and gives the food that endures to eternal life.

We need this food. We need God in our lives. God is not an optional extra to life, such as many people like to think these non-staple days. God is essential for life. When the *I am* of God's name is followed by *the bread of life*, we are being told something profound and basic: we need God. We need to get to know him, to accept the invitation to take off our shoes and come closer to God. We need God and should be as aware of God as we are of our daily food, whatever form it takes. Maybe the habit of saying grace before meals is one way of keeping God at the forefront of our minds at least as often as we eat. A small thing, and not an end in

itself, but something that can be a step into living our days acknowledging our dependence on the God of life.

When Jesus said that he would give the food that endures for eternal life, the people asked what they should do. They had come to him looking for another free meal. The first time he fed them they had not had to do anything but receive, but now that he seems to be saying that he is not going to give them a free handout of bread, they ask what they must do to earn it. And Jesus turns their expectations on their heads. They are expecting to be told to accomplish some task or perform some ritual or in some way to pay a price. Jesus says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent." (v:29)

This was Jesus' message to his people and it is his message and the message of his church to people down through the ages and still today, unchanged. The first work of God, the one on which all else depends is that we believe in Jesus, who God sent. That we believe that he is the embodiment of I Am, sent by I Am to bring us into relationship with I Am. Without that, no matter what work is done, no matter how good, how selfless, how empowering of others and sacrificial of self, it is not the work of God. It may be like the work of God but what transforms good deeds into godly deeds is what lies behind them, and what Jesus says God looks for is that we believe in him, and respond to him as the bread of life.

And the people asked him what right he had to say that. And people may ask us what right we have to say that. Are not my selfless life, and my helpful deeds just as good as yours, even if I do not believe in God and in Jesus, his Son? Is it not arrogance on our part to imply that there is a difference between good lives and godly lives? The people asked for a sign and by referencing Moses and the manna, they hinted again that free food might be a good way for Jesus to prove his words. And people still look to us and ask what we are going to do to show that we should be listened to. And of course we should live our lives in line with what we say that we believe, which means that we should live our lives showing that God is essential to us, that God is our staple food and that we turn to God in every circumstance. We should live our lives learning to mirror his love and passing on his good gifts. But that may not be the answer people want to hear.

John tells us that Jesus' answer to his questioners did not satisfy them. "The Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." As his followers, we may find that continually pointing people to Jesus as the way to discover God and come into relationship with God is also not what people want to hear. They want something more radical, something they have not seen before or heard before. They want signs and wonders, or at least free food, because people have not changed.

What we are given and what we offer is the bread of life. Life. Amen.

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