



The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
9 August 2015

Hungry for the Bread of Life

A sermon by Revd Alastair McKay

Reading: 1 Kings 19.4-8; Ephesians 4.25-5.2; John 6.35, 41-51

“Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” Are you hungry? Do you know where your hunger can be satisfied? I’m not, of course, talking about today’s lunch, although that may now be on your mind. Let me tell you my own story of discovering that I was hungry, and how I began the encounter with the bread of life which would eventually feed me.

I want you to imagine an 8-year old Alastair. I returned to England having been living in France with my family for over a year. My French was as good as my English. And I was new in an English boys’ school. My peers had me labelled from the outset: “French girl” they called me. And “French girl” it remained, for five years. The message was clear, and I got it. “You don’t belong. You’re not one of us. You’re foreign.” As any 8-year old would, I longed to belong. But I was neither academically bright, nor good at sport, both passports to belonging in that school. So I never belonged. I was never one of the lads. I never fitted in. Instead, I was “French girl”. It was meant to hurt; it did and I struggled to hide it; it put me in my place, outside. And the darts were fired until I left that school at the age of 13.

I then moved to a new school. But my old school was a feeder for the new one, and so I was known. The old pattern continued, seamlessly, although the labels were new. One that I was now called was “slickster” or “slick”. I can’t recall why in the 1970s it was bad to be “slick”. But it was bad. You didn’t want to be “slick”. You didn’t want to stand out from the crowd, or to be different: that was not a good thing. Being “slick” was not ‘cool’. The message fundamentally was the same, and was continually reinforced over the years that followed: you don’t belong; you are not one of us – you’re an outsider. No wonder that the twentieth century French novels, such as *L’étranger* – the foreigner or outsider – resonated for me.

I found a way to make sense of my painful experience. As part of the adolescent awakening that comes in teen-age, I concluded – as Camus and Sartre did – that a loving God couldn’t possibly exist. How was it possible, since my experience gave the lie to such an idea? So I declared myself an ardent atheist. Although I couldn’t express it, I was hungry: hungry for love and acceptance, hungry to belong – but I was clear that the idea of a loving God was a lie which I wasn’t going to be duped into feeding on.

I left school at 18, hungry, but not admitting it. I went to work in Australia for a while. Australia because it was as far away as I could get; because it seemed a world of promise and abundance; and because my grandmother had met an Australian family through a friend. They’d told her that they’d provide an initial home for me, and would help me to find work. However, I didn’t hear back from the O’Brien family after writing to them. Then eventually I heard that one of their children was unwell. But a further message came from the father, Peter: they still wanted me to come.

When I got there, I encountered a family with five children. I was 18, the eldest of four myself, and young enough to be an elder brother to this band of children. The youngest but one was Elicia. And Elicia wasn’t just unwell. She had a rare wasting disease. And she was dying. Elicia barely weighed anything; she was skeletal, completely incapacitated and only able to communicate a very little through her eyes. And she was just 8 years old.

Each day Elicia needed feeding and her nappy changing, as if she were a baby. Most days Elicia needed the liquid to be drained from her lungs, as her body wasn't strong enough to do so. She was utterly dependent. And as much as anything, Elicia needed people simply to be with her. Which was why the family had decided to care for her at home, rather than sending her to the hospital many miles away. And so I became temporarily part of the O'Brien family. And I joined in the job of caring for Elicia, and being one of those who fed her, or simply sat with her, or read her a story.

And being part of the family, I found myself sitting in on their weekly family Bible study, learning from stories often chosen by one of the children.

"I am the bread of life," says Jesus, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." I went to Australia hungry. Although I wouldn't have admitted it, I was hungry for something basic to life: love and acceptance. And among the O'Brien family – especially from the father, Peter – that's what I found: a love and acceptance that I'd never known; a belonging that I'd always sought. And in Elicia, I found an invitation to extend that love to others.

I remember Peter O'Brien saying that Elicia was an angel who'd been sent to them, as a family, by God. Angels are messengers from God. And, as I look back, I see that the message Elicia brought from God was one about love, a love that can feed us. When I met her, Elicia couldn't do anything, other than direct where her eyes looked; she couldn't *achieve* anything; she couldn't contribute anything *useful*. You could say that she was useless. But she could be loved. And she was valued because she was loved. Elicia called out a deep, heart-breaking love from her family; and a similar love from me. I was hungry, and I was beginning to grasp a love that could feed.

You will recall that I went to Australia as 'an ardent atheist'. My head was happy with that denial of God: it made sense of my world. But my head was sent spinning by my encounter with Elicia and the O'Brien family. By the end of my stay with them, my *heart* convinced me that I'd been wrong. Like the prodigal in the parable, I'd gone a long way from home; and while in Australia, I started to come to my senses. Unlike the prodigal, in a foreign country I found a loving welcome with the O'Briens. But that in itself didn't bring me home to God. The journey home, the return to the Father's embrace, didn't come until two years later – a story for another time.

But I began to turn my face towards God among the O'Brien family. I began to know that if I was going to find bread that satisfied, then I would need to seek God, and to do so in the person of Jesus. Why look to a man born to Joseph and Mary, brought up in the outback? "I am the bread of life," says Jesus. "Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever." Elicia's only prospect appeared to be an early death. But, as I was later to discover, Jesus offers us the chance not just of being fed, but of being raised to a new, satisfied life that lasts. That was good news for Elicia, and good news for the O'Briens. News of a bread like no other, offering true and enduring sustenance. News of a love basic to life on this planet: a bread that truly satisfies human hunger.

So I returned to Britain unable to claim any longer that God didn't exist. Because I had met God among the O'Briens. In their midst, and through Elicia, and her death, I eventually came to realise that I had encountered the God of love. Elicia was a gift from God, sent to the O'Brien family, but a gift whom I was somehow able to receive. I was humbled by this gift, Elicia; she taught me something about my hunger for the bread of life. Elicia helped to show me that I was hungry for a love: both to be loved, and in turn to give of that bread.

Are you hungry? Do you know what – and who – you are hungry for? Do you know what are you using to protect you from your hunger? Then, I used my teen-age atheism to protect me. Now, I can use my age and experience to hide behind. Each of us finds our own defence. What might be yours? It may be true, as a Sri Lankan evangelist once put it, that the sharing of the Christian faith is simply one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. But it's difficult to be humble

enough to recognise that *I* am a beggar, hungry for the bread of life. When I see someone begging on the street, do I look past them? Or might I see a reflection of myself?

But perhaps the problem is more that, like me, you have now eaten of this bread of life, and you feel satisfied by it. But that you know others, some among your closest family and friends, who don't want to put out their bowl to receive this bread. We are left longing for them, yearning that they would come and join us with hands cupped to receive the bread, so that they too might feast at this table, as we will shortly feast at the Eucharist.

The reasons for being unable to receive this bread of life may vary. You may not to recognise your hunger. You may not want to look on those who are least, in whom you're surprised to find that Jesus resides. But because Jesus resides with them, they can offer a key to unlock your heart; and so they can help you admit your hunger for the living bread.

For me, it was Elicia, a helpless but much beloved 8-year old girl, and her deeply aching family. In our gospel story, there was a young boy – perhaps another 8-year old – offering his meagre hamper to feed a massive crowd of 5,000. Who might be the one, the least of these, in your life? Who might be pointing you – and those you love – to the bread of life? And how might you and I, in our brokenness, be ones who can offer that broken bread of life to the world? And offer it in a way that it might be received, through the Father's grace.