

Sermon for 4th August 2024, Year B, Proper 13

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Exodus 16:2-4,9-15; John 6:24-35

Sermon

Today we continue a series of five Sunday readings which focus on bread. Once every three years, beginning at the end of July, we hear stories from chapter six of John's gospel, focusing on Jesus feeding the five thousand with bread, and declaring himself to be the Bread of Life, the living bread, and so on. I've heard some preachers even call it 'bread season', wondering how on earth they're going to find something different to say about bread for several Sundays in a row!

The supply of bread is clearly a significant topic in ancient cultures. Today, we can pop along to a supermarket and buy a loaf of bread for about £1.40, which is about 8 minutes' work on the minimum wage. But in ancient times, both in the time of Moses and the time of Jesus, food supply was a huge source of anxiety, and providing food for their people was one of the clear markers that made someone worthy of being a leader.

Our Old Testament reading from Exodus shows us clearly what happens when a leader seems unable to provide sustenance for their followers. Just six weeks after escaping Egypt through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites are already complaining that they're so hungry they would rather be back in slavery where at least they had plenty to eat!

In developed countries, most of us don't really understand what it's like to be truly hungry to that degree, but the Ngambaye people of Chad, who live with a greater fear of famine, have a saying that 'one day of hunger can make a wife leave her husband's house', recognising that real hunger can override every

other concern. If you don't have food, then even basic morality quickly goes out the window.

So, the question becomes, how does God, our Father who loves us, respond to this need? In the days of the Exodus, God provided food for the Israelites in the form of quails in the evening, and 'bread from heaven' that fell like snow in the morning. This bread became known as 'manna', apparently because of the first question they asked when they saw it – "What is it?" – which I'm told sounds like 'manna' when spoken in Hebrew!

Every day God provided a new supply, but there was a catch – they must only collect enough for a single day; if they attempted to gather more, it would go mouldy. This is the origin of the 'daily bread' that Jesus teaches us to ask for in the Lord's Prayer – "Give us this day our daily bread". The lesson the Israelites, and we, are supposed to learn, is to trust that our Creator will provide our daily needs, but we must apparently also resist any temptation to try to take that provision out of God's hands and make our security dependent only on ourselves.

This is, I think, possibly the most challenging part of the Christian path, especially for those of us who have been taught by family or government that the highest virtue is to be able to look after ourselves and not be dependent on anyone else.

People who live hand to mouth or survive on meagre resources shared within a community are not often admired by western societies but rather pitied and even derided. Even foodbanks and state benefits try hard to only be temporary safety nets until a person can begin to look after themselves again.

For my own family, financial security has always been the first and best of virtues. I was taught that once you are yourself secure, then you can look after others, if you want to, like putting on your own oxygen mask on a plane before attempting to help anyone else. So, you'd better spend your time getting a good

job and building up a savings pot. From this perspective, life's about finding security by storing up personal wealth, not seeking fulfilment or building community or any of that nonsense!

I remember a story an older priest once told me about when he had been training for ministry as a young man, and simply had too little money to support his wife and young family. On one occasion the family literally had no money for food, so after praying together, the husband said he would go to the shops with an empty wallet, simply in faith. As he approached his front door, he discovered an envelope sitting on the doormat, containing enough cash to pay for food for his family, for a month.

He told me this story on the verge of his retirement, living in a comfortable rectory and with a good pension to come; he reflected wistfully just how much closer to God he had felt in those days when he had so little, with no choice but to trust in God's provision.

Jesus clearly sees our recognition of our continual dependence on God as hugely important. Perhaps it's because as soon as someone becomes completely secure in their own possessions or their own status or abilities, they start to lose the need for anyone else, and so find it easier and more tempting to judge others; and even if they do offer charity, they often do so in a condescending and superior manner, without the humility of recognising that everything they now have belongs to God and came as a free gift from God.

Most of you will know that for a couple of years I tried being a nun. In many ways, I absolutely loved it. It was liberating to have no responsibilities beyond the activities of the day ahead. Even if I were to live to be a hundred, I would never have lacked for food or clothing or a place to sleep, or a community of love around me. My daily needs were fully provided for. There was of course, one major hurdle: if I wished to trust my wellbeing to that community, then I

needed to give up my own personal security – my house, my savings, my pension – and vow to put my trust entirely in others, and through them, in God.

Now perhaps, we start to understand the Israelites who wanted to head back to slavery in Egypt rather than trust in God to provide for them. And I certainly empathise with the rich young ruler who went away in distress when Jesus told him that to find the kingdom of God he so desperately sought, he would need to give away his own personal wealth and security.

Perhaps this is one gift of the second half of our lives, that as we grow older, we start to become dependent on other people's kindness once again. Compassion may rise in our hearts as we become aware of just how much support we need ourselves.

In our gospel reading, Jesus takes us a little further on our journey of understanding. The people are following him because he had just fed the five thousand, as we heard last week. They would even make him king if he only continued to provide. But that's not the kind of co-dependent relationship Jesus is seeking. He doesn't want people to rely on miraculous daily handouts; he simply wants us to recognise, in the deepest part of our being, that everything we have was given to us by a Creator who loves us, who will never stop seeking and searching for us, until we finally give up the idea that the only thing that will relieve our anxiety and make us happy is having as much money as possible under our own personal control.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus says. 'I am your security'. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry". This is why we're here in church. Not to be fed with tiny wafers of flour and water, but to acknowledge that to truly flourish as human beings we need God, and we need one another. We know that our hearts and minds will never be at rest until we find our rest completely in God, and trust that his love will never abandon us.