

Sermon – St Paul, Wimbledon Parkside, 19th August 2018

Living Bread

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

*I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread they will live for ever.*

Food and drink: we attach a lot of importance to them: and there's nothing wrong with that. Even the book of Proverbs encourages us to relish our food and drink! But sometimes we can take our search for the perfect gourmet meal too far.

On the beach in Pembrokeshire last week we joined a group of friends and enjoyed a barbecue. Nothing unusual about that; we had the usual generous supplies of sausages and burgers (meaty and vegetarian), plus kebabs and spicy spare ribs: but one thing struck one or two of us – that the best thing was what came last: one of the party had been out fishing and had brought in some mackerel which, fresh, and cooked over the barbecue, and eaten with a hunk of good bread, was the best food in the whole feast. No sauce, no spices, no side dishes even, just good, plain fish and good, plain bread. Food for the gods! Or rather, as one of our friends, pointed out, just what Jesus offered the disciples by the lakeside after the Resurrection! Sometimes, the simplest things are the best.

Our gospel readings over the summer period this year come from St John chapter 6. We began on the last Sunday in July with the feeding of the 5,000; next we had the people asking for more signs (as if they needed them!), and Jesus telling them about the true bread. Then for these remaining Sundays of August the 'bread of life' theme of St John chapter 6 continues as the loaves and fishes story is worked over, first in discussion between Jesus and the disciples and then with the people in the synagogue in Capernaum; Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life, inviting the people – and us – to accept that in the bread and wine of the Eucharist we share in the spirit life of Christ

himself. Finally, at the end of St John chapter 6 the crunch comes: those who find this teaching too hard give up: we're told that many of his disciples left him and stopped going along with him.

The longer we live – the more we learn about life – the more we realise how complex life can be. There are no simple answers to difficult questions, no easy solutions to life's problems; no subject which even experts can agree on. But Jesus makes categorical statements, like the one in this morning's gospel, when he says, 'If anyone eats of this bread they will live for ever.' An echo of the conversation with the Samaritan woman by the well in chapter 4:

'Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water that I shall give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst.'

Clearly, he's not speaking about physical water, or physical bread. Jesus says: I AM the bread of life. I AM, the phrase which was a stumbling block to many who couldn't accept what they saw as blasphemy. The same I AM which God spoke to Moses – 'I AM who I AM, tell the people I AM has sent you to them.' Jesus's I AM explains that both the gift of manna to God's ancient people in the wilderness and the sharing miracle of the loaves and fishes were parables – parables of Christ giving himself, the true bread, 'the bread that endures to eternal life, the food which is offered to you by the Son of Man'. He is simply saying that he himself is the single answer to the complexity of life, and that the Way he shows will satisfy all our frantic hungers and thirsting.

It seems easy to say this, but does the teaching of Jesus really offer solutions to the incredibly complex issues of life as we meet them day to day? Can his teaching help us raise troublesome teenagers, pay the bills, handle hassles with neighbours or in the office, can they

help us find time for all the things we feel we have to do? Isn't it simplistic to say that all our needs are met? – because it's clear that, in practice, they're not.

But to understand the full strength of what Jesus said, we need a mind-shift. There are, most surely, solutions to even the most complicated problems once we discover what's truly real. Most of us get caught up in the clamour and frenzy of daily life, and we assume that this is what life is all about – but that's just the way we choose to see it. We can choose to accept that in the love of God in Jesus we will never 'hunger' or 'thirst', but only if we come to see that life actually is simpler than we are ready to admit.

To see life as basically simple does require a major shift in perception. To get the right answers, you have to ask the right questions. What do we really want in life? Is it really more possessions or things around us? More comfort, more tasty food? What basically do we need to give us strength and energy for living? How can we get on better with other people? If we can begin to answer these sorts of questions – if we can begin just to ask them – we might begin to understand more about living happily and effectively.

So what are the questions we need to ask ourselves? Of course, there are still the stresses and strains of life, there are still the bills to pay, there are still all the things we worry ourselves about. But if our attitudes change, if we can pay more attention to the quality of life rather than to quantity, if we can discover what is ultimately going to satisfy our real needs, then we can rise above all those things, and see that the food we need – the food we really need – is offered in abundance.

Jesus spoke constantly about the importance of doing God's will; he spoke about simplicity, and of living for others. The great truth about Christianity – the great truth about Jesus – is that it does offer – he

does offer – all the answers to our essential needs.

And it's ultimately the simplest things that give us the greatest satisfaction. The simple, bare necessities are what we really need for a fuller life. Like the grilled fish and the plain bread at the barbecue. Like the simple food which God provided for his ancient people in the desert. Like the food the risen Jesus give the disciples by the lakeside. The simple things. We need to concentrate on what is really essential, instead of exaggerating what we see as our needs. We need to realise that we are our own worst enemies by giving ourselves unrealistic expectations; we complicate life by turning luxuries into necessities. What do we really need, to be happy? We can trust that God loves us and cares for us with infinite love, even in the smallest details of our lives. We can use that trust to help us see through the things which don't matter, and then we'll discover for ourselves the truth that whoever comes to him will not hunger, and whoever believes in him will never thirst, and that whoever eats this bread will live for ever. Amen!