



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The bread of life

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26 July 2015

John 6:24-35

As we have established previously, John's Gospel is unique and certainly different from the first three or Synoptic gospels. A simple way of explaining this is to note that John omits much material that is in the other gospels and brings his own particular flavour.

To confirm this point, we remind ourselves there are no infancy stories in John, no baptism, no temptations, no Last Supper, no account in the garden and no ascension. Now these are not insignificant events. However, John has his own purpose and explains it explicitly in John 20:

“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (20:30-31)

When we encounter the selective use of material in John, it is good to keep that approach in mind as you handle scripture in its wider context within the gospel.

Jesus declares that he is the Bread of Life and that anyone who comes to him will never hunger and thirst spiritually again. This truth is understood against the background that those who ate of the manna in the Old Testament story were hungry again, but not those who eat of the Bread of Life.

The 'I Am' statements of Jesus are set within the context of his wider teaching and we see that the signs or miracles in John's Gospel are linked to these great statements.

The gospel writer expands on each saying and in John we see the beginning of what we might call 'the first discourse'! Let us remind ourselves of each of the great statements:-

- I am the Bread of Life (6:35)
- I am the Light of the World (8:12)
- I am the Gate for the Sheep (10:7)
- I am the Good Shepherd (10:11)
- I am the Resurrection and the Life (11:25)
- I am the Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6)
- I am the Vine (15:1)

Our text is the first of the great 'I Am' statements:-

“Then Jesus declared, 'I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” (John 6:35)



Just a week ago here in the theatre, we explored how Jesus fed a great crowd and you cannot avoid noticing that this statement comes within the same broader section. The disciples and the crowds have had opportunity to observe Jesus feeding the multitudes by the simple means of bread and fish:-

- It appears that Jesus has been able to spend some time alone with the disciples (v.24)
- On realising that Jesus and the disciples had left, the crowds go to Capernaum in search of him. For the second time, they have made a long journey and are perplexed as to how he had arrived so quickly (v.25)
- The people are inquisitive and want to know so much more, but Jesus realised that their intentions are not always correct (v.v.26-27)

The whole section could be said to be shaped by the three questions that the crowd asked – and each develops into much deeper meaning.

Firstly, they ask, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” (v.25) The question confirms that Jesus had walked on the water, but it also reveals how persistent these crowds are in their desire to follow him. Once again we remind ourselves that they are preoccupied for all the wrong reasons. (v.26)

Secondly, they ask, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” (v.28) They are obviously beginning to understand enough to further enquire of Jesus about finding the food that will last. This question leads to the clear declaration with regard to how important it is to believe in him (v.29)

Thirdly, “What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?” (v.30) This is a hugely significant question. After the great sign of feeding the crowds, what other sign could they want? The reference to the Old Testament clearly underpins this question (Exodus 16:4 and Psalm 78:24). Jesus is able to correct them by saying it was not Moses but “the Father” who gave them bread on a daily basis. One can conclude from this that Jesus is saying that the bread which is true is not manna, but Jesus Christ himself.

To sit down and read a gospel or, if you have the time, the whole of the gospels, can be a very satisfying experience. As Jesus conducted his ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem, there was a continual desire for the tangible – and it is obvious that the ‘signs’ of Jesus respond to that desire. This first sign was not only a reference to the Old Testament, but also offers the thought that Jesus Christ meets the people’s constant desire to be fed, as they were captivated by various forms of hunger.

There are similarities with the woman at the well, who wanted water so her thirst could be quenched forever.

Many people have found that this text is useful when placed in the setting of the Lord’s Supper which, as we have already established, is not found in John’s Gospel. The great teaching focus seems to be around the theme of bread.

This evening I want to offer to you three ways in which we can discern the relevance of this passage for us in our own day.



Jesus is the source of everything that is necessary for life

Whenever I have had the opportunity to lead a youth weekend, I have found it is an interesting exercise to explore the question, “What is necessary?” We have become so much more sophisticated than previous generations and what is necessary for many of us today would have been thought impossible just a short time ago.

Some of the experiences that helped to change my own life have been when I have encountered people and situations where human need has clearly prompted me to make a response. I think of:-

- A young man confined to a wheelchair who became a friend when I was a young person
- A visit to the Philippines made me aware of the challenge of child abuse as I spent time in Manila in a centre in Manila that helped to rebuild the lives of street children whose lives had been devastated by unscrupulous adults
- Here at Wesley Mission, I constantly find myself confronted by human need

These experiences demand that I answer the question, “What is necessary?” in a rather different way.

The gospel truth is that we cannot live by bread alone. When Martin Luther looked at this text, he talked about bread symbolising all the necessities of life, such as food, shelter, comfort or existence itself. That’s why I think it is important to note that the text includes the thought of thirst, suggesting that we are considering the total fulfilment of our needs, not merely bread in the tangible sense.

There are a good many lifestyle questions that emerge from a text of this kind. It could be that the prevailing question may be about our perception of life itself.

One commentator drew my attention to something I hadn’t really considered in any depth – when Jesus first stated that he was the Bread of Life, he didn’t say ‘eat’, he said ‘come’. Metaphors can never be precise about human experience. There are three in the extended passage. We have ‘come’ (v.35) and we have ‘eat’ (v.51) and we have ‘believe’ (v.29). They all imply something similar.

What Jesus offered in himself is the gift that would sustain the disciples through the most difficult of times that lay ahead – and such challenges could even be impacting upon the early Christian community who first heard these words taught in the life of the church.

We need to be prepared to respond

One of the themes of this gospel relates to the word ‘Come’. We know from the outset that the disciples are invited to ‘come and see’ – and throughout this section in John’s Gospel there seems to be the thought that we should ‘Come and believe’.

There is a deep hunger in the lives of very many people and we know that it is only as the hungry take food that they are fully able to appreciate the satisfaction that can be brought to them.

I can remember spending time in the Texas city of Dallas when a friend, who I had the first contact with for 30 years only last year, took me around the university area of Southern



Methodist University. We passed a beautiful German delicatessen but, sadly, my friend carried on up the street. I lingered for a while to take in the smells that were emanating from the shop. However, he was teasing, for he turned round and said, "I thought you would like it here!"

There was all the difference in the world between observing the shop, looking in the window, smelling the wonderful aroma – and entering and enjoying good coffee and food!

For me there are a number of aspects we must not ignore:-

- We must confess our hunger
- We must concede our emptiness
- We must conclude that only Christ can satisfy completely

I suppose a good way of exploring this is to ask the question, "For what are we hungry?" This became the title of a book by James Mayfield and he explored the different types of dominant hunger by studying the different approaches that people take to this matter.

Sigmund Freud was convinced that of all the hungers and desires that motivate us throughout life, the most dominant is that of pleasure. This is not only sexual lust, but it can also be the irresistible urge for just one more piece of that delicious chocolate cake!

Alfred Adler did not deny that longing for pleasure is definitely one of the motivations of human behaviour; however, he was convinced that our most dominant desire is hunger for power – or what we might call the desire to be in control.

However, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, because of his experiences in a Second World War death camp, disagreed profoundly. He did not deny our human desire for pleasure and our longing to be in control. However, both of these were taken away from him in his experience in Auschwitz. He, therefore, concluded that the basic human hunger or deepest drive within us is our deep longing for meaning and purpose. We want life and our lives to really matter.

I do enjoy Jewish humour; it has a feeling all of its own. There is the story of an old man who goes into a café every day for lunch and always orders the soup of the day. One day the manager asked him how he liked his meal. The man replied, "It was good, but you could give me a little more bread." The manager had a word with the waiter and asked that the next day they double the pieces of bread. He asked again, after the meal, if he had enjoyed it. Once again, he said, "Very good, but I could do with a bit more bread."

This continued for two or three days with the same response. The manager became obsessed with wanting to see his customer satisfied with his meal. So he went to the bakery and ordered a six foot long loaf of bread. When the man came in as usual the next day, the waitress and the manager cut the loaf in half and buttered the entire length of each half. They lay it along the counter, right next to his bowl of soup. He ate the soup and all the bread and when the manager asked his question, he replied, "It was very good, but I see you're back to giving me only two slices of bread!"



Jesus Christ satisfies us now

In the wider passage, we hear so much more about the comparison between the Old Testament feeding and what Jesus is alluding to. It comes to a very important verse that reminds us of what we have to learn here: “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the Bread of Life.” (v.47)

On the theme of eternal life, we often talk about this in a way that is not essentially biblical. Eternal life begins now! And Jesus brought that which is eternal into our present experience. It is as we are satisfied by the bread of life that we understand the great secret of life itself – and that life becomes understood in the context of eternal life.

The bread of life sustains us entirely. It becomes that without which life cannot go on – and the life we are talking about is far more than mere existence. The offer of Christ is in the present day, but it is the offer of a life which is eternal. It was Barclay who concluded, “That is the greatness and glory of which we cheat ourselves when we refuse his invitation.”

Three times in John 6 Jesus identifies himself with the concept of ‘bread’ (v.v. 35, 47 and 51). The link between the feeding of the crowd and the ‘I Am’ statement cannot be ignored.

- Jesus feeds the crowd, but they will be hungry again
- Jesus feeds with eternal life and ultimate satisfaction

There is something most satisfying about the enjoyment of a meal. However, this is not just about filling the stomach. A satisfying meal will probably have some other ingredients: it will likely be nourishing, balanced and tasty. Perhaps the most satisfying of meals is enjoyed in the company of family and friends.

It was while I was in North America 35 years ago that I first encountered the ‘all-you-can-eat’ restaurant. It had the feel of a feeding frenzy. Jesus Christ offers satisfaction which is far more important.

Not long ago, I read the words, “Bread has power but in the end its power will fail. Bread can buy you land but not love; it can buy you bonds but not brothers and sisters; gold but not gladness; silver but not sincerity; hospitals but not health; three carats but not character; houses but not homes. You can trade bread for commodities but not comfort; real estate but not righteousness; hotels but not heaven.

“To satisfy your hunger for heaven you cannot live on the bread of the earth, you must eat the bread of God. That bread is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

Jesus offers to you and I real satisfaction for the whole of our life and invites us to respond to his generous invitation.