



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 1st August 2021

Readings: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a, Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35

Open our hearts and minds, and speak to us through your holy Gospel. **Amen.**

Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven’ (John 6:32).

As I was listening to the Scriptures being read just now, I reflected on how many sermons I have heard taken from particular texts contained within them, particularly Ephesians 4; and I have chosen to speak on none of them, but rather a verse from towards the end of the Gospel, John 6:32.

‘Bread of heaven’ or ‘bread from heaven’ – is a very familiar image for Christians, based, of course, on the story of the manna in the wilderness, which served as food for the Israelites on their journey from Egypt. There have been plenty of theories as to what manna was among biblical scholars and those whom we might call biblical botanists; but it remains an open question. But if we talk to those today whose biblical knowledge today is slender, what does it mean? Similarly, if we use such language in our worship today, are we in effect speaking in a foreign language? This morning I want to explore some of these questions so that you do not feel embarrassed at not understanding what I am saying, whether you admit it or not.

If you were one of Jesus’s disciples after the resurrection telling stories about what Jesus was like, and why he was significant, is not this precisely one of the stories you would want to tell? So it is not surprising, at least to me, that the Feeding of the Five Thousand is one of the few stories to find its way, almost unaltered, into each of the four Gospels; and its meaning does not depend on complicated theological ideas like redemption, salvation, incarnation, atonement and the like. Its meaning lies in its simple, common humanity. I think that Janet captured this in her dialogue last week.

Jesus is speaking in the context of the feeding of the five thousand, which had happened the day before. Where did the food come from? At the beginning of the twentieth century so-called ‘advanced thinkers’ would use such explanations as that everyone had some food with them, but it was not until they were embarrassed by the boy who offered his lunch, that they brought out theirs! Well, if you are determined to see no miracle in this event, believe on: but you will then be even more puzzled by what Jesus says in our text, that it was God who provided what the crowd ate.

Perhaps if we are trying to think of a modern parallel, we might be struck by the stories coming out of the various food-banks around the country at present. Last week it was reported in the *Cambridge News* that they are going to give food-vouchers to their customers, which will enable them to ‘buy’ (or whatever the appropriate verb is for using vouchers) food during the school-holidays, in place of the free school meals they would get if they were at school rather than on holiday; and I have seen stories on television of some food-banks in other parts of the country touring the streets, and giving out loaves of bread that had not been sold the previous day at no cost. I even think that I heard the mother in one family say, ‘It’s a miracle’. At least such stories preserve something of what Jesus was getting at when he suggested that these actions were part of the grace of God revealing itself to ordinary people. (I have had too little time this morning to reflect on the news item that the government is planning to offer free Deliveroo vouchers to persuade young people to be vaccinated comes into quite the same category or not; but it is certainly not the same.)

Should this be surprising? If not, why should it be surprising, that at the end of our Gospel reading Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of life’ – something, someone indeed, given to us by God out of sheer grace? But if, when talking about Holy Communion, and we come to the question of what Jesus meant by saying, ‘This is my body’, we immediately put up our theological guard rails, and twist ourselves in knots to avoid taking his words in the most obvious sense. Why? Just because we are Protestants (or

think we are), and we don't like the way in which Catholics have tried to explain the 'how' of this. The late Stephen Mayor, whom many of us here knew well, wrote a book about *The Lord's Supper in Early English Dissent*: that was the first book that drew my attention to the fact that our theological ancestors had more to say about our inclination to begin any discussion about the Lord's Supper by saying what it is not.

Could we not begin, for a change, by saying what it is – an encounter with Jesus Christ, following his own command? an identification with his own self-giving on the cross? the beginning of a new era for us and all human beings? There are so many positive things to say, and I don't have time to begin to say them now. But there may have been an incident in our lives when Communion suddenly meant something new to us – (cf Paul's words about 'there is a new creation'). So let us use the time in the next few moments to reflect on that particular time or occasion in our lives when Communion did suddenly mean something new to us – and why; and let us pray that this might be so again today.