



Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 8th August 2021

Readings: Ephesians 4.25 - 5.2, John 6.35, 41-51

Living bread, eternal life

We're in the middle of five weeks over which we're reading the whole of John 6. And that chapter follows one of this gospel's characteristic patterns. It starts with the narration of a miraculous sign, in this case the feeding of the five thousand, and follows that sign with an extended, confrontational discourse in which Jesus engages with his critics. There's a similar pattern in Chapter 5, where the miraculous sign is the healing of a paralysed man at the pool of Beth-zatha in Jerusalem, and we see it again in Chapter 9 following the healing of a blind man at the pool of Siloam.

So the debate began in last week's reading. Jesus challenges the crowd, which had temporarily satisfied their physical hunger through the miracle, to believe in him, to commit themselves as his followers and so gain the food that 'endures for eternal life'. The crowd demand another sign, referring back to the iconic episode following the exodus from Egypt when they were fed daily with manna, the bread from heaven. Maybe the crowd are looking for an everlasting supply of free lunches. They misunderstand Jesus, in a way that parallels the misunderstanding of the Samaritan woman in John 4. *She* thinks Jesus is offering her life-giving water; *here* the crowd think Jesus is offering them life-giving bread. 'Yes, please', they say. You can almost see them stretching out their tunics, ready to catch the loaves as they come. And Jesus says, not that kind of life-giving bread. In the first of the famous 'I am' sayings in John's gospel, he tells them '*I am the bread of life*'.

Well, that's the 'Previously in John' recap. In today's reading, the crowd are disappointed not to get their bread pay-out. They don't think much of Jesus' claim to be the true bread that came down from heaven. Their reaction reminds us of the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth in Mark 6, which was our lectionary reading a month ago. It's almost Pythonesque: he's not from heaven, he's from Cherry Hinton. 'We know him. We know his parents. How can he have come down from heaven?' They cannot conceive of the mingling of the eternal with the ordinary that happens when heaven invades the world.

There's a deliberate irony here: they are described as 'complaining' or 'murmuring' against Jesus, in exactly the same way that their ancestors 'complained' and 'murmured' against Moses in the manna story. They're re-enacting the faithless rebellion of their forebears, who would rather undo the exodus and return to slavery in Egypt than go for wholehearted dependence on God for their daily bread. They rejected Moses, and in so doing rejected God. Now the people reject Jesus, and in so doing reject the Father. No wonder Jesus says that no one can come to him unless they are dragged to him, like fish in a net, by the Father.

And then, Jesus raises the ante. It's as if he says, 'It's worse than you think. I'm not just claiming to be as good as the bread from heaven that kept your ancestors alive in the wilderness. I'm better.'

'Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever... Whoever believes has eternal life.'

Again, hear the echo of the dialogue with the Samaritan women in John 4.

‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’

Eternal life. That phrase is not unique to John’s gospel - remember, for example, the rich young man in the other gospels who comes to Jesus asking ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ But it’s repeated throughout John. It’s like a musical phrase that recurs during a symphony. It’s one of the fundamental contrasts that Jesus presents: life instead of death, forever instead of temporary, sustained instead of decaying, vibrant instead of atrophying. The Samaritan woman and her neighbours in John 4 embraced that life with passion. Here, Jesus’ neighbours reject it.

I wonder what that phrase ‘eternal life’ means for us, and for our friends and neighbours, if they ever encounter it say, at a funeral. It clearly *includes* life in the age to come. Jesus says, ‘I will raise them up on the last day’, and in John 11 ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live’.

But I suspect that in folk religion, in the watered-down Christianity that resides in our cultural memory, ‘eternal life’ has become just a label for some ethereal existence post-death. And we spend this life longing for it but never touching, never realising it, like those tragic characters in a Chekhov play wistfully longing for Moscow.

No, surely Jesus intends this hope of resurrection to transform our lives now. It puts our lives in perspective. Use your time and resources well. Invest in things that will last, that have eternal value, not the flimsy trappings of worldly riches and success, ‘where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal’. It’s the exact opposite, actually, of the prosperity gospel. Make good use of that stuff that doesn’t last, don’t try to hoard it. The manna will be no good tomorrow. Put God’s gift to work, don’t bury it. Begin eternal life now, born afresh by the Spirit.

I don’t know how this plays out in your daily life and mine, but I hope it renews our sense of what really matters. In the upside-down world of the kingdom of God, I suspect that’s something wholly different from what attracts attention in our world, what feeds our ego or our appetite for achievement.

Our reading from the letter to the Ephesians gave us examples of what that looks like when it comes to relationships within the church. Regard yourself as members of one another. Speak the truth, but speak only what is useful for building up, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. Put away bitterness and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

And what about our examples for our personal life? Perhaps the act of love that no one will notice. The support for a friend whose problem looks to be unsolvable. The time spent with the person of no importance. The act of generosity to the one who can’t reciprocate. The sustained support for the just cause that seems unattainable.

These are not just things we ‘ought to do’: they’re the life of the new age renewing the old. They are heaven invading the world. They are the full measure, pressed down, running over. They are abundant life, eternal life.

‘This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.’

May God grant us insight and grace to receive the bread of eternal life and to choose to spend ourselves on things that really matter.