

Daily bread

26 February 2023

BIBLE READINGS

Exodus 16:1-3, 11-15, 31

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the desert ... The whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, but you have brought us out into this desert to kill us all with hunger.' ...

The Lord said to Moses, 'I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, "... in the morning you will have bread to eat. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God."'

... in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, 'It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. ...

The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

John 6:1-70 (selected verses)

Narrator Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing those who were ill. Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.

The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip ...

Jesus Where can we buy enough food for these people to eat?

Voice 1 It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread.

Narrator Another disciple, Andrew, spoke up ...

Voice 2 Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?

Jesus Make the people sit down.

Narrator Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. There were about five thousand people there.

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples:

Jesus Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.

Narrator They gathered twelve baskets with the pieces of left over bread.
After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say...

Voice 1 & 2 Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world!

Narrator Knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, Jesus withdrew to a mountain by himself.
The next day, the crowd that had eaten the bread were looking for Jesus and found him on the other side of the lake. ... Jesus said:

Jesus I tell you the truth – you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the bread and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but work for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has placed his seal of approval on him.

Voice 1 & 2 What must we do to do the work God requires?

Jesus What God wants you to do is to believe in the one he has sent.

Voices 1 & 2 What sign will you perform that we may see it and believe you? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written: “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”

Jesus It is not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread that God gives is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Voices 1 & 2 Sir, give us this bread always.

Jesus I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ...

Narrator At this the people began to grumble about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said:

Voices 1 & 2 Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I came down from heaven”?

Jesus No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. ...
The one who believes has eternal life.
Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, yet they died.
But the bread that comes down from heaven is such that anyone who eats it will not die.
I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

Whoever eats this bread will live for ever.

The bread that I give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Narrator Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves ...

Voices 1 & 2 How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

Jesus Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.

Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live for ever.

Narrator Jesus said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. On hearing it, many of his disciples said:

Voices 1 & 2 This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?

Narrator From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Jesus asked the Twelve:

Jesus Do you also want to leave?

Narrator Simon Peter answered him ...

Voice 1 Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

MESSAGE

Welcome to the longest chapter in Gospel of John ... and we didn't read all of it this morning! Some of this chapter is very familiar, some has echoes from other stories, some is shocking and controversial ...

Bread seems to be the main focus ... both bread to eat for lunch and a more mysterious type, the **bread of life**, which recalls earlier conversation in the Gospel about **living water**.



Eating bread may also remind us about the sacrament of **Communion**. But when we get to the passion account in John's Gospel, there is no Last Supper, no Passover meal shared with the disciples, no precedent for our sacrament of Communion.



What John does instead is bring together Jesus' feeding of the 5000, Jesus' reflection on what the Eucharist or Communion represents and the first of seven '**I am**' sayings ... I am the bread of life.

Let's get into the detail.

John tells us that the **Passover festival** was near ... and there are echoes in this chapter from the wider story of the Passover and the Exodus, especially the references to God providing manna for the people to eat in the wilderness.



In our first reading from the book of Exodus, the people have left Egypt and crossed through the Sea, but now face a different sort of challenge out in the desert. They **have no food** and suddenly life back in Egypt seems more appealing where at least there was plenty of bread to eat. Moses prays to God who hears the grumbles of the people and promises to provide food in the morning.

When the people wake up there is a dew on the ground that dries to a thin edible type of wafer. 'What is it?' the people ask ... **man hu?** in Hebrew ... translated as **manna** in our Bibles ... **bread** that God has given the people. This manna had to be collected afresh every day because it went off or spoiled if kept. Most likely, this story of God providing daily manna is the background to the line in the Lord's Prayer ... **give us today our daily bread** ... God, please provide our basic needs for today.

At Passover time each year, the Jewish people would remember and retell the Passover story and wonder when God might send them a new Moses to lead the people on a **new Exodus** to free them from the rule of the Romans. So when Jesus feeds the large crowd with bread – out in the wilderness – people put two and two together – and speculate that Jesus just might be the promised Prophet like Moses.

John writes that Jesus suspects the people will try and **coerce** him into that role, to make him **king** – or **Messiah** – combining the roles of Moses and David. So Jesus withdraws from them. It's not yet his time and that is not his way. It's not God's way this time around.

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle story that occurs in all four Gospels, so it was obviously regarded as very significant in each branch of the emerging church. Three points stand out in this evocative story.



- First, *Jesus uses **what is available*** ... five small loaves of bread and two fish. When we face a challenging situation and don't quite know what to do, perhaps a good starting point is to look around at **what we have available** ... even if it doesn't seem like much.

In God's generous hands, it may well be enough.

- Second. *Jesus provides **practical help***. The people are hungry so they are given a simple meal of bread and fish. Not fancy but satisfying. Jesus will go on to talk about the bread from heaven, but we must remember that bread made from ingredients grown in the earth is also needed to feed hungry people.
- Third, *Jesus provides **more than enough!***

There is no skimping. No one goes hungry. Everyone eats their fill and there are baskets left over. God provides abundantly.

While we often think and act from a mindset of **scarcity** – especially in the church – God is a God of **abundance**.

Next day the people came looking for Jesus.

It seems they were after more free food.

There is then a conversation that is similar to the one with the woman at the well ... if you drink this water you'll soon be thirsty again, but if you ask **me** for a drink, I will give you **living water** and you'll never be thirsty again.

Here Jesus recalls the giving of manna.

Don't look to me for a daily feed of manna, but rather seek the food that endures to eternal life, which I can give you. Like the woman at the well, they are intrigued and want this food that gives eternal life, which Jesus calls the **true bread from heaven** that God gives.

Give us this bread they demand.

Well, says Jesus, the **true bread that gives life** is **me**, sent by God to give life to the world. Your part is to believe that God sent me and to take my 'food' deep into your heart and believe it.

Living water ... bread of life ... things essential for eternal life that are available through Jesus.

This life that Jesus came to bring is spiritual life.

What this looks and feels like is slowly revealed through the Gospel but at its heart is a relationship with God made possible through Jesus.

Believing or trusting in Jesus is the way to receive this eternal life.

But when Jesus speaks of coming down from heaven, the crowd immediately object and try to cut Jesus down to size.

Who do you think you are, Jesus? ... the key question in this entire Gospel ...

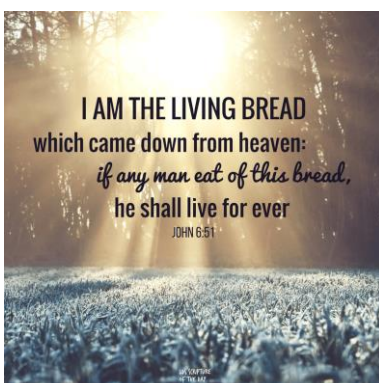
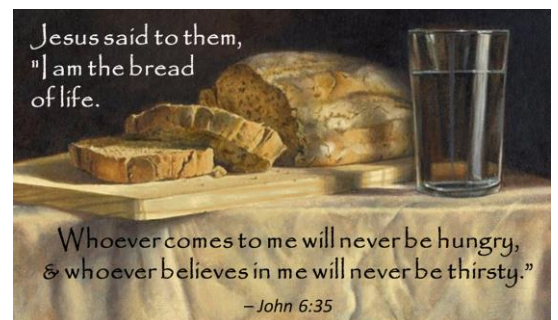
The unbelieving crowd's answer is that you're just the son of Joseph.

We know your father and mother.

We know where you came from. John invites us to see more, to grasp the **heavenly origin** of Jesus.

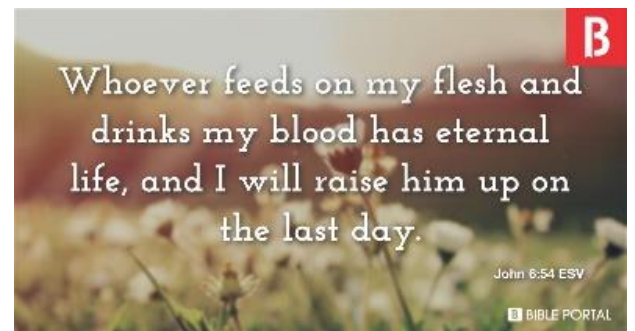
If you will trust what Jesus says about himself, you will see that Jesus himself is the **bread of life** that has come down from heaven.

Whoever eats **this bread** – the **living bread** from heaven – will live forever, unlike the Israelites who ate the manna in the desert and who later died.



And then comes the shocking statement from Jesus ... to avail oneself of the living bread you have to **eat** it ... meaning that you have to eat my **flesh** ... and drink my **blood**!

Never Jesus! We are Jews! Our law forbids us to eat blood, because blood represents the life of the creature. We will never contemplate eating your flesh Jesus. That's a totally repulsive idea.



The conversation moves into the language of the **Eucharist**, of **Communion**. How are we to interpret the words of Jesus about eating his flesh and drinking his blood?

Taking these words **literally**, as the crowds were doing ... leads to a fairly shocking outcome ... that we are to become cannibals and literally eat the flesh of Jesus. By the way, this was an accusation made against early Christians who met in secret early on Sunday mornings to celebrate Communion and drink the blood of Jesus. It is also close to some Catholic understandings of Communion ... that the bread and wine used become the actual body and blood of Jesus.

But I don't think that is what Jesus meant. I think he is using **figurative** language. When we eat the bread and drink the juice during Communion, we are using our senses of taste and touch and smell and sight to provide tangible reminders of Jesus' words that point to how he gave up his flesh and his blood on the cross to give eternal life. The bread and juice are not **magical** ... rather they are **symbols** or **reminders** of Jesus and his words.



Our connection with Jesus and our invitation to eternal life happens through faith, our trust in Jesus. But there is something intangible that happens during Communion. In the words of some liturgies, during Communion we come close to

Christ and Christ's presence comes close to us.

Somehow through the simple actions we remain connected with Jesus and he connects with us, in our innermost spirit if you like. How this happens is something of a mystery that we grasp by faith rather than puzzle out with logic.

The teaching on needing to eat the flesh of Jesus is just too hard for many in the crowd and even for many of Jesus' followers. They turn away.

Yet the inner circle of Twelve plus others remain ... because ... as Peter says,

'You have the words of eternal life ... you are the Holy One of God.'

So at the end of the day, whether we understand the full meaning of Jesus' words, we can grasp that just as we need physical food, physical bread to live, so we need to trust in Jesus and connect with the bread of life to enjoy the sort of eternal life he was talking about. Both types of bread are important.