

John 6:35,41-51

1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

It can often be quite frustrating when we might be trying to teach someone something and, despite spending much effort and time with them, they don't quite seem to get it. Or maybe we've been in a situation where someone's being trying to explain something to *us*, but we somehow just can't grasp what they're getting at – whether it be the off-side rule in football, or when we were at school trying to make some sense of quadratic equations.

Now, following on from a couple of Sundays ago, the Gospel readings which are recommended for use in the Church of England are continuing to focus on chapter 6 of John's Gospel. The chapter begins with the feeding of the five thousand, followed by the account of Jesus walking on the lake in the midst of a storm. And then, John records a lengthy conversation which takes place the following day between Jesus and the crowds who were following him, a conversation which is very much centred

around the Lord's declaration, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." It's the first of the seven 'I am' saying of Jesus in John's Gospel. And these in themselves speak volumes about who Jesus really is. Because, just as a reminder, back in the Old Testament, in Exodus 3:14 we read of the time when Moses asked God what name he is to be known by, so that the Israelites would then know God by that name. And in response to Moses' question, God declares, "I AM WHO I AM...Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you." So, when Jesus says, "*I am* the Bread of life", this in itself would have given a powerful message to the people listening to him that he was saying to them that he was more than just another good teacher – that he was divine, he was identifying himself with God.

Now what we witness amongst the folk who were following Jesus was a serious *lack of understanding* about what he was actually saying. They had been there when the 5000-plus folk had been

miraculously fed with just the five loaves and two fishes, but somehow they really couldn't grasp the deeper significance of this miraculous event. They assumed it was simply about satisfying their *physical* hunger, and that was it! But the Lord, of course, declares to them that it was a *sign* pointing to something altogether much deeper than that. It pointed to *himself* as the Bread of Life – the One who gives eternal life to all who put their trust in him.

And when Jesus states that he is the bread that comes down from heaven, the people again fail to understand what he's talking about – they still don't get it. In fact, just as their ancestors had done in the wilderness centuries earlier when they had complained to Moses and Aaron about their lack of food, so now those following *Jesus* were grumbling once *they* came to realise that the bread Jesus was offering was *not* physical food. And their response to Jesus' declaration about himself – “I am the bread that came down from heaven” - once more reflects their very earthly, purely materialistic thinking – “Is

not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”, they complain. In other words, how can he be from heaven when we know who his parents are? Of course, the readers of John's Gospel and *we* know differently – we know about Jesus' divine origins, as testified to in the prologue to John's Gospel (“In the beginning was the Word...”), and in the virginal conception of Jesus attested to at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Now in the midst of all this, the one thing the people *do* grasp, and what they object to, is the fact that Jesus was putting himself centre stage. They realised he wasn't just saying that he would *give* them bread from heaven (as many folk at the time were expecting from the Messiah); but rather he was saying that he himself *was* the Bread of Life. And he declares that he has a unique position as the only one who has come down from heaven – the only one who has actually seen God the Father.

And this leads into the first of the two points I want to highlight here, namely the way in which this passage speaks to us of the uniqueness of Christ. In today's post-modern culture, the prevailing assumption when it comes to faith tends to be that different religions are simply different paths leading in the same direction – never mind the small fact that they're all saying vastly different things! But what the Lord says here profoundly challenges that mistaken assumption. Because, in declaring himself to be “*the* living bread that came down from heaven”, what Jesus is saying is that he's the *only* one who can *reveal* God and teach people about him. When we see Jesus, we see God, who is unseen. Now this is very significant indeed. One of the fundamental tenets of the Old Testament is that no human being had actually *seen* God. But here the Lord Jesus declares that he himself, “the one who is from God...has *seen* the Father.” It's a truth which echoes the majestic words of the Prologue to John's Gospel where the author declares, “No one has ever seen God. It is *God the only Son*, who is close to the Father's heart, *who has made him known.*” The

things is, Jesus *is* God's unique and everlasting provision – we will never need anything more, any further kind of revelation, as is claimed by Muslims, or Mormons, or any other of the endless cults which have emerged over the centuries and still hang around today. What's more, the unity of the Father and the Son is emphasised here, in that people listen to and learn from the *Father* by listening to the teaching of his *Son* and learning from *him* – Jesus *is* the image of the invisible God.

And this means that we need to come to *Jesus*, because no-one else can reveal the Father to us. While we cannot see God at the present time, the gift of eternal life *is* available to us. And when the author of John's Gospel talks about ‘eternal life’, he's not referring to something that's wholly in the future, after we die, but it's something which we begin to experience in the ‘here and now’ as we enter into relationship with the invisible God through faith in Jesus Christ. And *then*, on the *last day*, when Jesus returns in glory, all who have put their trust in him - all who have been drawn to him

by the Father - will be raised up. The after-life isn't about disembodied spirits floating around in some kind of spirit world forever and ever, but rather the Christian hope is ultimately about our physical bodies being raised and transformed as part of God's *New Creation*, just as Jesus' body had been when he was raised from the dead. That's what we mean when we declare in the words of the Creed that we believe 'in the *resurrection* of the dead, and the life of the world to come.'

And then secondly, we can't fail to miss the connection with the Holy Communion in what the Lord says here – "I am the living bread...Whoever *eats* of this bread will live forever..." The manna which God had graciously provided the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert centuries earlier, was *not* the true bread of life because all who ate it still died. In stark contrast, Jesus says that the one who eats the *true* bread from heaven will *not* die. The living bread was Jesus' flesh which he would give for the life of the world, alluding, of course, to his death on the Cross. Jesus, the Word

who became Flesh, became the Bread of Life for a sinful world by laying down his life so that we might live.

Now we have to take care to understand what Jesus is actually saying here. Because this isn't about simply coming along to church and receiving the bread and wine at Holy Communion, believing that simply doing this *in itself* will make us right with God. Rather, when the Lord talks about eating the true bread, this is actually a metaphor for *believing* in *him*. This is where we find a marked divergence between Anglican and Roman Catholic thinking. Because in our Anglican understanding (which I believe to be biblical), nothing 'automatically' happens when we receive Communion – our receiving of the elements must never be divorced from personal faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We are *not* saved by the actions a priest performs when he or she presides at Holy Communion – rather, we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ alone. For Communion to be meaningful, it must be accompanied by faith in Jesus and in what

he has done for us on the Cross – “...the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the [Lord’s] Supper is *Faith*.” (Article 28) Those who believe, who embrace Jesus *himself* as the Bread of Life, are marked as God’s people in the present, and assured of life in the age to come.

In our brief Old Testament reading we find a situation where God miraculously satisfies the physical hunger of an individual – his prophet Elijah. Elijah was on the run from King Ahab’s wife Jezebel who was after his life. He was worn out, emotionally and physically, he had hit ‘rock bottom’ – “It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life...”, he says. But in the midst of this, the angel comes and provides him with food and drink, giving him physical strength to press on in the work to which God had called him. When we find ourselves emotionally and physically drained, when we find ourselves burdened by sin, may we look to Jesus and put our trust in him, the Bread of Life. He *is* the One who brings us forgiveness, who sustains us as we journey on, and who will raise us up when he comes again in glory.

So, this morning, as we share in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, the Lord Jesus invites us to come to *him*, the Living Bread. He himself *is* God’s provision for us – there is nothing more – everything we need is found in *him*.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise for the precious gift of your Son, the Bread of Life, the Living Bread that came down from heaven. Help us to be attentive to *his* voice and to walk faithfully in *his* way. And grant us courage to boldly declare the truth of the uniqueness of your Son as *the* way that leads to eternal life. In his name we pray. Amen.