

John 6:51-58

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20

In the western world today, bread is perhaps no longer regarded as the staple food it used to be. It's more likely the case that the mighty BigMac, chicken tikka masala, sweet & sour pork and fish & chips are now regarded as being the essential foods to sustain life. But in most places around the world, where folk don't have all the culinary luxuries and excesses that we enjoy, bread is still seen as a basic feature of their diet. They retain an acute awareness that items like bread are the very *least* they need in order to simply stay alive.

Now bread, of course, features prominently in chapter 6 of John's Gospel, which we are currently focusing on. The chapter began with the account of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand with just five loaves of bread and two fishes. And, later on, Jesus enters into a dialogue with the crowds who were following him – a dialogue in which the Lord makes use of the image of bread to declare to them

some of the truths about who he is and why they need to put their faith in him. It's 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."

But what the dialogue between the Lord and the crowd reveals is the fact that they had really failed to grasp the *deeper significance* of what they had experienced in the feeding of the five thousand – that it actually pointed to who Jesus really *is*. *Their* interest in Jesus lies rather in his feeding their bellies - they were very much hooked on *physical* food / bread – so they fail to see that the *true* blessing which God was offering them was on a different level altogether. What they lacked was an awareness of the much deeper needs of our human condition which Jesus *actually* came to fulfil.

So, first of all, as the conversation progresses, Jesus declares, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." In the time of Moses, there was bread

from heaven – the manna which the Jewish forefathers ate. But Jesus contrasts the ‘bread of heaven’ / manna which God provided to the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert centuries earlier – which needed to be given repeatedly in order to satisfy their physical hunger – he contrast this with the ‘*true* bread from heaven’ – Jesus himself – who permanently satisfies our *deepest* needs. The manna from heaven might have sustained the people of Israel for a time during their trek towards the promised land, but in the end, it did not prevent them from dying; but Jesus promises that those who feed on *him* will live for ever. Of course, it’s not that those who put their trust in Jesus will not die as others die, but that they will experience eternal life in the here and now in relationship with God, and because this relationship is not broken by death, the Lord Jesus will raise them up when he comes again in glory.

Then secondly, the Lord pushes the metaphor even further by declaring, “.....unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life

in you.” Once more, this leads to a dispute amongst those listening to him, as the people take his words literally – “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”, they ask. And taken literally, of course, this would naturally seem somewhat repulsive – after all, for Jews, the drinking of any blood was forbidden. But, of course, the Lord is speaking metaphorically here. What he’s really talking about is our need to put our faith / trust in *him* – the source of eternal life. Putting our faith in him is likened to eating his flesh and drinking his blood. His broken body and blood poured out on the Cross needs to be personally appropriated by an act of faith in Jesus. The bread needs to be ‘eaten’, as it were, to give life.

Now 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 *now* by being in relationship with our Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. So, what the Lord says here challenges *us* to look beyond the material / physical concerns of life to what *really* matters – seeking constantly to abide

in Christ, so that he may abide in us. There is a mutual indwelling of Jesus and his disciples through the Holy Spirit.

So, how *do* we ‘abide’ in Christ? Well it’s about continuing to be loyal to *him* above all others and to constantly obey *his* word. And, in turn, Jesus remains in continuing fellowship with us. There are, of course, plenty of earthly attractions which try to distract us from our fellowship with the Lord. But we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. And to do so, we have to make time in our daily lives for those things which help to nurture our relationship with him – most particularly, through spending proper time in prayer and study of God’s word each day.

And thirdly, we see, too, in the Lord’s image of ‘eating his flesh’ and ‘drinking his blood’ a connection with Holy Communion – it’s a kind of reflection upon the words of Our Lord when he instituted the sacrament – ‘This is my body’, ‘This is my blood’. In fact, the word “flesh” deliberately points to what we call the Incarnation – the coming

of God among us in Christ – summed up in the well-known words of the prologue to John’s Gospel – “And the Word became *flesh* and lived among us.....” Jesus’ flesh is true life-giving food because he is God himself come in human form / flesh. So, in eating his flesh, so to speak, we are taking the life of God within ourselves. As the words of the Prayer of Humble Access put it:

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the *flesh* of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his *blood*, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore *dwell in him, and he in us.*

We must remember, though, that we don’t automatically receive life in Christ simply through the act of partaking of the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Rather, first and foremost, we receive him by *faith*.

So today, we’re reminded that *Jesus* fulfils the deepest needs of the human heart – our desire to know God our Creator and to be in relationship with him - however much we might try to deny or ignore that longing. Only *Jesus* can fully satisfy our hunger

and our thirst – the ‘God-shaped hole’, as it were, in our lives. This is why the Lord’s use of the image of ‘bread’ is particularly appropriate here. Because just as bread is absolutely essential in order to survive physically, so we *need* Christ, the *Living Bread*, who gives us eternal life when we put our trust in him. He’s not just one among many ways to God, but *the* Way to the Father.

In the Old Testament reading from the book of Proverbs, the true wisdom which is from God is personified (as it is throughout the book) in feminine terms. And here wisdom is portrayed as building a house in which a feast is laid out, and servant-girls are sent out to call people to the feast – people described as being ‘simple’ and ‘without sense’. And this really includes everyone. Because we may regard ourselves wise in the eyes of the world; we might consider our academic qualifications and skills as endowing us with a certain wisdom. But the real question is, ‘are we yearning to know the wisdom that comes from *God*?’ We are invited to eat of the bread and drink of the wine of godly wisdom. And

this godly wisdom is embodied in the Lord Jesus. As Paul declares in Colossians, “[in] Christ himself...are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (2:3) So the search for wisdom begins by putting our trust in Christ, in whom *all* the secrets of divine wisdom and insight are to be found.

And, in turn, when we are in fellowship with Christ, we begin to live lives motivated by *godly* wisdom. As Paul puts it in the reading from Ephesians, we will seek to use the limited time that we have to the fullest advantage, our desire will be to discover what *God’s* will is for our lives and to do it. What’s more, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit – “Do not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the *Spirit*.” A person who is drunk is said to be ‘under the influence’ of alcohol, and it leads to wild, uncontrolled actions; in stark contrast, the Spirit-filled Christian is under the influence and power of the *Holy Spirit*, which makes us like Christ. And it leads, too, to a desire to worship the Lord in fellowship with other believers, as well as an

attitude of gratitude to God “...at all times and for everything...”

So, this morning, we share, once again, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion – *signs* pointing us to Christ, the true Bread of Life, in whom all our hunger, our deepest longings, are satisfied. And as we do so, we’re invited to re-commit ourselves to the *Lord Jesus* – that we may evermore abide in him and he in us.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the gift of eternal life for all who put their trust in your Son. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help us to constantly abide in him, to be obedient to your word, and to live “*not* as unwise people but as wise...”
In Jesus’ name. Amen.