

Dorset South and West Circuit

Service for Sunday 15 August 2021 by Tim Wells, Local Preacher .

As you begin to focus on and in God's presence, you might like to breathe in and out slowly, or simply keep silent - or to prepare in whichever way seems best for you.

I suggest that you then read the following service slowly - there is no need to rush! And so, firstly ...

Psalm 111 v 1-3

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honour and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

Hymn (STF346)

Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
born in our darkness, he became our Brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high.

Christ is the world's peace, Christ and none other;
no one can serve him and despise another.
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.

Christ is the world's life, Christ and none other;
sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother-
he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
Glory to God on high.

Give God the glory, God and none other;
give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
give God the glory, God with us, my brother:
Glory to God on high.

Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)

A prayer of approach

Come, Lord, work upon us, set us on fire and clasp us close, be fragrant to us, draw us to thy love, let us run to thee.

St Augustine (354-430)

Gospel reading.

John 6 v 35; 41-51

v35. And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.

v41-51. 41 The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." 42 And they said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

43 Jesus therefore answered and said to them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. 44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. 45 It is written in

the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. 47 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. 50 This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."

Reflection

The Bread of Life

1. A few years ago, I read a biography of Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States. Lincoln is generally acknowledged to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest President, the USA has ever had. The leader who managed with great difficulty to bring his country through four years of Civil War.

Many American Presidents would like to claim that they had been born in a log cabin, and that they worked their way up from nothing – Lincoln was the only one who could genuinely claim to have done that. So, when he was elected President in 1860, there were many people who knew or had heard details of his background, and who therefore said "How can this man be any good? He'll be a joke as President. His parents never achieved anything, so why should the son be any different?" It was only what Lincoln himself said and did which gradually won people over to appreciating and supporting him.

2. Our New Testament reading was from John chapter 6. Earlier in John's Gospel – in chapter 4 – just before returning to Galilee, where He had been brought up, Jesus admitted that a prophet is without honour in His own country.

He recognised that, amongst the people who knew Him well, things could be tough. It's usually how things are, isn't it? You can get away with a lot in the midst of people you don't know very well, but amongst those who've known you a long time, it can be much harder to make the right impression.

At the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus performs one of his most famous miracles – the feeding of the five thousand. From a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, Jesus was able to provide a meal which satisfied all these people, to the extent that twelve baskets were needed to collect up what they were unable to finish. This miracle had a tremendous effect on the stomachs of all these people ... what effect it had on their minds and their hearts is perhaps a different matter.

3. The day after they had received this food, some in the crowd, which was still following Jesus, asked Him: "What does God want us to do?" Quite an interesting question to ask ... they must have seen something in Jesus to ask it of Him. Jesus told them, "This is what God wants you to do: Believe in the one he has sent."

And, even though they had all been fed from a few loaves and fishes, they replied "You must show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What will you do for us? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! As the Scriptures say, 'Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Perhaps it's interesting that they could accept the miraculous manna which came from God through Moses, but seemed to be blind to the miracle of the bread and fish from Jesus, which they had eaten just the day before. I wonder if we find it rather easier to believe that God performed miracles in earlier generations, than to believe He will still perform miracles today?

If so, then perhaps it's because it doesn't take any real faith to accept something which might have happened years ago ... but if we believe that God is still a God of the miraculous, perhaps there will be a responsibility on us to get involved. And that of course can be scary.

4. Jesus continued, "I assure you, Moses didn't give them bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "give us that bread every day of our lives." And so Jesus said to them "I am the Bread of Life ... No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me."

5. Well, that did put their backs up! John says that the people began to grumble because He had said "I am the bread from heaven." They said, "This is Jesus, the son of Joseph". Like those who knew Abraham Lincoln's family background, they said "We know his father and mother. How can he say 'I came down from heaven'?" Just as they grumbled at Moses in the wilderness, so now they grumbled at Jesus ... people always love a good grumble, don't they? No wonder Jesus had to say to them "Stop complaining amongst yourselves".

No doubt it got even worse, as Jesus continued: "Yes, I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. However, the bread from heaven gives eternal life to everyone who eats it. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever."

6. John says that Jesus's words shocked His followers so much that many of them drew back and no longer followed Him. Suddenly, perhaps they didn't find Him comfortable to be with ... Jesus doesn't promise a comfortable faith or an easy life with Him.

It was then that He asked the original twelve disciples if they also wanted to leave. It seems to me that He was seeking to find out how committed they were to Him. I'm sure He is also interested in our commitment to Him. Peter famously replied for all of them: "Lord, to whom shall we go ... You have the words of eternal life".

You see, even beyond the miracles, it was the words of Jesus which had transformed their lives. The miracles showed His God-given power, but it was what He taught them that made them want to stay with Him and learn more. The disciples realised that what Jesus said made Him unique ... "to whom else shall we go – You are the only person whose words give abundant, life-enhancing, eternal life".

So often, of course, Peter got things wrong ... this was one occasion when he got things exactly right.

7. I wonder how often we consider the Words of Life which Jesus offers to us ... perhaps we have never really thought about them. Perhaps over time, we have, if we are honest, been taking them for granted.

We have recently bought a breadmaker, and Rosemary has been making her gluten-free bread in it.

It is not always easy though to make another loaf in time for when you might need it. And if you do run out, it's then that you realise how dependent you can be on something as basic as bread ... and how valuable it is.

8. And equally, how easy it can be to take Jesus's familiar words for granted.

Perhaps we need to consider them and their value afresh ... what can God do for us in our daily lives through these wonderful life-giving words ... words that will feed us, that will nourish us if we are willing to accept them, and the One who said them, into our lives:

"I am the Bread of Life ... No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again."

Hymn (StF254)

1. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, And His righteousness, And all these things shall be added unto you
Allelu Alleluia

2. Ask and it shall be given unto you, Seek and ye shall find, Knock and it shall be opened unto you.

Allelu Alleluia

3. We shall not live by bread alone, But by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord

Allelu Alleluia.

Karen Lafferty (b 1948)

Prayers of Intercession

God of love, whose compassion never fails, we bring before thee the troubles and perils of people and nations, the sighing of prisoners, and captives, the sorrows of the bereaved, the necessities of strangers, the helplessness of the weak, the despondency of the weary, the failing powers of the aged. O Lord, draw near to each; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Anselm (1033-1109)

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn (StF495)

1. Dear Lord and Father of mankind, Forgive our foolish ways!

Reclothe us in our rightful mind, In purer lives Thy service find, In deeper reverence, praise.

2. In simple trust like theirs who heard Beside the Syrian sea

The gracious calling of the Lord, Let us, like them, without a word Rise up and follow Thee.

3. O Sabbath rest by Galilee! O calm of hills above,

Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee The silence of eternity Interpreted by love!

4. With that deep hush subduing all Our words and works that drown

The tender whisper of Thy call, As noiseless let Thy blessing fall As fell Thy manna down.

5. Drop Thy still dews of quietness, Till all our strivings cease;

Take from our souls the strain and stress, And let our ordered lives confess The beauty of Thy peace.

6. Breathe through the heats of our desire Thy coolness and Thy balm;

Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire; Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,

O still, small voice of calm.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)

Final prayer

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in Him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (based on Romans 15 v 13)

Amen