

Sunday 5th August 2018
Trinity 10 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 16.2-4,9-15

NT: Ephesians 4.1-16

G: John 6.24-35

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

I am a man who, it will be of no surprise to learn, enjoys a good dinner. At theological college, one of the spiritual exercises we engaged in was to work out which of the seven deadly sins was our 'besetting sin', the one which we were most likely to trip up over. It is a discipline which I would heartily recommend as a starting point for self reflection. Now I for, many years, was convinced that I was a sloth sort of man- the beguilement of laziness on every level, from one more minute wrapped in a duvet to the shredding of important documents sent by the bank, the diocese, my mother etcetera in order to avoid dealing with them. However, as the exercise progressed, I realised that, in fact, the temptation to which I most often succumbed was gluttony- as I say, I enjoy a good dinner.

Yet, despite my tendencies to overindulgence, food actually ranks comparatively low down the aspects of dinner which most appeal to me. A good cigar is, to my mind, better than any pudding and a glass of decent vino is worth any number of bowls of soup. Yet what I like most about a good dinner, perhaps unsurprisingly for a clergyman, is the ritual of it all. This doesn't only apply, of course, to several course feasts for special occasions- there is a tangible ritual in even the everyday meals which keep us going week by week. From the silent alchemy of an egg poaching in a pan (I consider it anathema, and I hope you all do too, to poach an egg in a microwave) to the unwrapping of the crisp, folded paper in which might be found a chippy tea- every meal, no matter how ordinary, has its ritual.

One mealtime ritual, however, crosses national, regional, or class based divides. And that is, of course, the breaking of bread. From the crisp melba toast before a five course feast to the buttered barmcake that comes before the battered fish, from the breadsticks of Sicily to the dense black bread of St Petersburg- bread is the ultimate warm up act. Those clever men who inflicted the Revised Common Lectionary on us have given us rather a long time to think about bread in our Gospel readings for the next few weeks. Yet the crucial point in our Gospel today is not about bread as bread, that crusty collation of yeast, flour etcetera but rather bread as ritual, bread as sign, bread as God- God as bread.

Jesus calls himself bread not to identify himself as some sort of first century Jewish gingerbread man but rather to remind us that it is in Him that we gain our true sustenance. That it is He who, like bread crosses cultures, and time, and place. That it is He who, like bread, should be our baseline of nourishment. He with whom we engage with before every meal, first thing in the morning and last thing at night. That it is He, the Risen and Glorified Christ who comes to us to sustain our daily lives, indeed, to keep us, spiritually, alive. And like bread, he comes to us broken, still bearing the scars of the crucifixion, still fully human and yet also fully divine. Yet unlike bread, this is a nourishment that will last, which needs no topping up- those who eat of this bread will never be hungry.

What then, is this which we will eat in a matter of moments here today? The Holy Communion, the Blessed Sacrament, the Lord's Supper. Well, it is bread. And like the other bread that we eat in our ordinary lives it is both a key part of the meal, of its ritual, of its preparation and yet, it is also here to tantalise us for something more. In this bread, we taste of the food of Heaven, we have a moment of mystic and sweet communion with the Bread of Life himself- namely Jesus. Yet it is also for us a foretaste of the feast that is to come. Just as the bread at dinner is not the main course in and of itself so it is today- this is a glimpse of the reality of the Heavenly banquet, the eternal feast of Heaven that puts any

dinner party on earth, no matter how refined, to shame. This bread is our tantalising taste of what awaits us in the hereafter- the feast at which we will be guests alongside the saints and angels, we will sit by those who have gone before and those who are to come; that feast of the Lamb, that feast of the very Bread of Life himself- the victorious and resurrected Christ.

This is the food that endures, as our Gospel says, for eternal life, the food that the Son of Man himself gives us. This bread is nothing less than a taste of that bread which we trust we might feed on forever. It is the very promise of Heaven, the Heaven to which we believe we will be joined. Let us pray for this bread always.

How, then, do we react to this taste of the Heavenly? What do we do in this liminal space between the taste of that Bread of Life and the serving of that most glorious main course, the Feast of the Lamb? Again, our gospel is clear. Believe.

This is the work of God wrought out in the world- that we might show forth our faith in our lives. Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians we heard as the second lesson this morning tells us what this might mean- to grow and build each other up in love. This is the pre-dinner ritual to which we must, as the Church, commit ourselves. This is what the living out of that belief must look like- bearing with one another in love, growing together so that we might be worthy of a seat at that table at which the eternal feast is served. This is the work of Christ on earth- if we wish to eat this bread, this eternal manna, then it is this change that must be shown forth in our lives.

This bread is here as the warm up act, like every grissini stick or barmcake from Liverpool to Lahore- it is here to give us a taste of and a taste for the Heavenly life, the life of faith, the life that is bound up wholly and utterly with the life and love of Jesus Christ. Let us pray

that this bread might give us such a taste for the life that is lived in full communion with the Bread of Life himself- the Bread that will not leave us hungry. Lord give us *this* bread always.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie