

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> August 2021**  
**Trinity 10 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: 1 Kings 19.4-8**  
**NT: Ephesians 4.25-5.2**  
**G: John 6.35, 41-51**

This is the month when every week there will be another sermon about the Bread of Life. There are good points and bad points about this, but if nothing else you will get the general message about Jesus saying, "I am the Bread of Life." It is one of the most straightforward of the "I AM" sayings in John's Gospel because we get the general idea straight away. In fact in today's passage Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever." We all know about bread, and we all know that it is one of the most basic foodstuffs. Our bread machine churned out something with lots of granary bits in which I have been working my way through at breakfast for the last few days, but that is not substantially different from a white sliced loaf from the supermarket. Bread means pretty much the same to everyone.

Or does it?

Last week we were trying to take a few days holiday in another part of the UK and went to church on Sunday in a large and significant church where the priest preached for the first of our weeks looking at the Bread of Life. He began his sermon by talking about bread for a bit (mainly about his wives and daughters baking, though no indication that he did so himself) before saying that he did not think that anyone in church that morning had ever been *really* hungry for food. If you would like a condemnation of the Church, then there it is: the priest expected the hungry to be people 'outside' the Church and not inside it. He could not possibly know the life stories of those in the Church that day, but that is less significant than his expectation, when he wrote his sermon, that the hungry would be somewhere else. It is an easy trap into which the Church falls: building a Church of the comfortable who discuss the poor and the hungry but without an expectation that they are part of the conversation as well.

This is a very common trope in the Church. There is a modern hymn about the

Resurrection, sung to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, which I actually rather like, apart from the slightly troubling verse:

*So proclaim it in the high-rise,  
in the hostel let it ring;  
make it known in Cardboard City,  
let the homeless rise and sing:  
'He is Lord of life abundant,  
and he changes everything;  
the Lord is risen indeed!'*

It is uplifting and moving, but when you have served in parishes where these are real situations then you are suddenly challenged by the utterly patronizing nature of a hymn which sees the poor as people you talk about, rather than people you are. Prayers for the poor and needy are great, but they also presuppose that they are someone 'other' than you.

Now, the reality is that the majority of people have not been so hungry that they would steal to eat; they have not been so much in need that fear of consequence has not held them back from action. But is our Church to be one which includes these people or one which merely tries to alleviate their situation? You may have read the slightly peculiar article by the Archbishop of York in yesterday's *Telegraph* about being English: when he wasn't going on about cricket, with its barely disguised allusion to Norman Tebbit's definition of Englishness, he said that a church for England should be "Not just church bells and Evensong, but foodbanks, debt relief, youth work, shelters for the homeless and all the other ways the local church works with others to make a difference." Great words, but no where did he capture that a church for England was also *visiting* foodbanks, being in a homeless shelter, and needing debt relief. It was all about need being for other people, clearing the way for sermons about the Bread of Life being about spiritual food which we all need.

Yes, we all need spiritual food, but are we able to eat spiritual food if we are physically hungry? Much as the Church may not want to hear it, our hunger for God, our hunger for spiritual fulfilment, is easier to notice when our stomachs are full. Confronted with a Church which expects the hungry to be outside the door rather than inside, I ask myself what barriers we are creating which stop the hungry coming inside. That is not to say that every

church needs to adopt a culture which feels alien to those who attend, but we do need to know the barriers which are there. Barriers are rarely visible: there is nothing worse than a church community trying to appeal to a particular group of people, because they invariably get it wrong. Barriers are much more fundamental: they are in words, facial gestures, and expectation of behaviour. It's not just about those with no food, because those words and facial gestures can be experienced equally in so many other situations. Those barriers can be created in all types of church and against all types of people: there are places where I don't feel welcome.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Let us not say that this is about spiritual food which we all need. That's a weak message, because we all need real food and without real food you can't even think about spiritual food. In her sermon last week, Revd Tabitha spoke of the missionary in India whose host said of eating rice: "It gives me strength. I could not do without it... it is my very life!" So look at Jesus' saying in a new light and ask what it says: not spiritual food, but real food; not food for someone outside the building, but food for someone inside the building. If it is food for someone else, then it must be food for you as well. So, what do you need? What do you need now?

Something which Jesus was quite good at showing was anger, but when we are comfortable we aren't very good at being angry. Social Justice in the Church is usually the vocabulary we use for doing something for other people, but perhaps we need to feel more angry about what we don't have ourselves so that we can feel angry for what other people do not have. We do not usually feel angry for the petty jealousies of not having a bigger car or more exotic holidays, but where is the anger in your life for what you are lacking? In our second reading from the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes, "Be angry, but do not sin." So, let's be angry.

Jesus' identification as the Bread of Life should not be reduced to something spiritual but something physical; not as something for others, but something for us. If we cannot find amongst us those who are lacking food and drink then what are we doing which stops them coming into our building? I am not so naïf as to think that we can solve hunger, but I do think that we should not use Jesus' statement as an excuse to ignore it when it should challenge us to look around to see the hungry. As we heard in our second reading, "We are

members of one another.”

The Gospel is always a challenge, but looking for bread is a greater challenge, and one which we should be doing. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” by which we can understand that when you have found that which you really crave then you are ready to find him. Those who are starving rarely talk about Jesus; those who have a desperate need – whatever it is – are rarely talking about Jesus. But when that need is met, then we find him. What we come to realise is that he has not just arrived, but he was there waiting with you for the food, for your need to be fulfilled.

So, what is the bread which you need? And, just as importantly, what is it that we are doing which is stopping someone else finding their bread? If we are to spread the Good News, then we had better feed people first with the food which Jesus gave to the 5000 before he told them about the bread of life.

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