

## Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> August 2024

Bible text: John 6:24-35

OT Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15

Theme: 'I AM the bread of life'

The crowd was running around, looking for answers. They'd seen Jesus feed over 5000 with a few loaves and fishes, well, they'd done more than see it, they'd eaten the bread and fish, and been satisfied. Last week's reading told us what the crowd intended to do next: 'they were about to come and take Jesus by force and make him king'.

Jesus gave them the slip, first by going back to the mountain, where he regularly prayed alone, then by joining his disciples out on the sea, walking to them across the wind-whipped waves: they were terrified but he joined them and brought them peace.

In this week's reading, we're on the other shore, the following day. The crowd scents a mystery: Jesus is no longer on their side of the sea of Galilee, but he didn't go in the boat with the disciples. The crowd tracks him down. They bombard him with a series of questions. This first question is more or less: 'how did you get here?'

Jesus replies with a series of *uncomfortable* answers. His answer to that first question challenges their very reason for following him: are they hungry for the word of God, are they aligning themselves with something of God in his work, or are they sensation-seeking, looking for more of the miracle-bread which filled their stomachs yesterday? Jesus, who is not very meek and mild in this conversation, says it's the latter. They follow him because they ate their fill.

Jesus challenges them to think about bread. You work to get your daily bread, he implies, but you're still left feeling hungry. He challenges them to think about that hunger, a hunger for sensation, for more, for something missing... something that endures. Don't work for bread, he says, work for God. And this, Jesus says, means coming to him.

Well, here we are, among the crowd, today. Here in Luxembourg, here in the world, we're certainly running around, looking for answers. We may be looking for answers in **work**, or in politics, or in family and relationships, or in sport. These seem reasonable places to look for answers. There are definitely answers available in these places, and these answers can be valuable.

Of course, sometimes we don't like the answers we find. People in the crowd reply to Jesus' challenging answer by asking another question – good technique - maybe they're testing him, maybe they're genuinely seeking an answer. They pick up on his words about work: 'What must we do to perform the *works* of God?' Interesting choice of word, *perform*. The crowd uses it again later, to describe what Jesus is doing, asking him 'what work are you performing?' Looking at different Bible translations, you begin to get the impression that the question the crowd is asking is: 'We liked your bread miracle yesterday, how can we perform the same miracle?'

When I hit on that meaning, checking across the translations, I realised the crowd are doing exactly what Jesus accuses them of: asking for a sensational talent to change the world, to feed themselves, to feed others. They recognise it's a work of God, and what they're hungry for is to be able to replicate it. Their question about doing God's work isn't about aligning themselves with God's will for the world, it's more about claiming God's power so that they can change the world according to their own plans.

Now this hits home. Bono, the singer from U2 who's made an impact in issues of global justice, seems to have urgently asked the same question, of a Christian leader. The response was: 'Stop asking God to bless what *you're* doing. Get involved in what *God* is doing - because it's already blessed.' What God is doing, is already blessed.

This is very counter-cultural. Follow your dreams! Follow your heart! Visualise it and it will come to you! That's what Bono was doing. That's what the crowd seem to have been doing: 'Give us the same power you have, Jesus, to do the same amazing things!'

But Jesus' reply puts paid to the follow your dreams mantra. The amazing thing God has for that crowd, the work of God for them, for me, for you, isn't a big, showy power. It's aligning ourselves with Jesus, where Jesus is already at work. 'Believe, in the one who was sent by God'. 'Get involved in what God is doing - because it's already blessed.' This is something Geoff likes to remind us of, here at All Saints: 'Jesus invites us to join in with what He is doing in the world'.

The crowd decides to ask for *evidence* that God has sent Jesus. If you've got any kind of social media, you'll probably be familiar with pictures of people having a moment like this (*puts hand to forehead in bemused despair: 'facepalm'*). This is one of those moments for Jesus, and he takes it pretty well. The Jewish crowd, descended from the people who travelled through the wilderness with Moses, say they'd like a sign from Jesus like the manna-bread Moses gave to their ancestors.

*Facepalm*

People, he fed over 5000 of you yesterday, with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. Wasn't that exactly the sign you are looking for? Heaven-sent bread for the people God loves?

Firstly, Jesus reminds them it wasn't Moses who fed the people, but God. That mysterious manna-bread came from God, not from any human, and it sustained the people for through the wilderness for 40 years. Then, Jesus says that what God did then, he is doing now. There is, once again, heaven-sent life-giving bread for the people God loves.

PAUSE

'Oh yes please', say the people. 'We'd like that. Give us this bread always'.

PAUSE

'It's me.'

PAUSE

'It's me', says Jesus.

**I am** the sign you were looking for. **I am** the bread which gives life to the world. **I - am** the food that endures for eternal life.

I am.

PAUSE

I am.

You've spotted that? The Jewish listeners spotted it, of course. 'I am' - the name God identifies himself by, to Moses. The name the Gospel writer John records Jesus as having used, 7 times in his narrative. 7, the number of perfection for the Jews, the number for God. Jesus says '**I am**' 7 times in John's gospel, and this is no coincidence of word choices, no coincidence of number choices, but a very deliberate 'sign' he gives the crowd. Jesus is signalling, 'What God is, **I am**'.

## PAUSE

Their response, even if they can hardly make sense of it yet, is perfectly good, actually, probably as good as we could do ourselves: 'Sir,' they say, 'give us this bread, always.' How can we respond? Jesus, give us yourself, always.

Because the muddled crowd hardly knew what to make of what Jesus was telling them. He hadn't even finished teaching them about bread. The reading continues next week, and we'll hear more of Jesus' earth-shaking, tradition-shattering claims about himself, and the bread of life.

But for now, it's enough for us to come alongside the work of God, to 'get involved with what God is already doing', to stand alongside Jesus in the places where He is and join in the things He is doing, by putting ourselves in Jesus' hands, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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

Let's bow our heads and pray:

Jesus, sometimes it seems we know exactly what you're talking about, exactly where you're taking us. But Lord, sometimes the words you say hardly make sense to us in our scrambled lives, our suffering world. Whether today your words are making sense to us, or whether we're merely holding on weakly to your promise, we come to you now, we bow before you now, we align ourselves with *your* plans rather than our own, and we say, 'fill us with your Spirit, **and give us your bread of life, always**'.