

Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 11th August 2024

Bible text: John 6:24-35

OT Exodus 16: 4-5, 13-15

Theme: 'The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh'

Are you hungry? That's a question we need to ask in church from time to time. I remember when I went to a refugee event in France and was introduced to a young man who'd told the organiser he knew me a little – the organiser came up to me and said 'He says he's seen you at church, but what he won't tell you is that he's been sleeping on the street. Can you do anything for him?' He was so clean, so up-beat, so presentable, his pride would never let him admit how bad things were, but yes, he was hungry, and he was homeless.

Then there's the wealthy church in the English stockbroker belt, where I went on my placement while I was training. The vicar told me that he always serves food at mid-week children's events, because he knows some parents are going without food themselves, to keep their children fed. If he feeds the kids at church, he hopes the parents will be able to eat at home.

So, 'are you hungry?' is a valid question for today, and we don't just mean 'are you peckish or could you fancy a bite to eat?' but we mean that many people today are wondering where their 'daily bread' is going to come from. And those people can be among us as well as around us. The Lord's Prayer spells that out: 'Give us today our daily bread', yet when most of us here pray it, that anxiety over provision of basic food, isn't any kind of anxiety for us. It's worth remembering how real an anxiety it can be though. It was a real concern for the crowds who were following Jesus– there was a lot of poverty and hunger around the Roman empire.

The Jewish crowd listening to Jesus also placed huge significance on bread. Last week I spoke about Jesus' use of significant words and numbers in John's gospel. There are all sorts of coded messages, in Jesus' words and actions, and in the way John chooses to tell them. John also connected his whole narrative of Jesus to the calendar of Jewish festivals, and in chapter 6, he makes lots of links to Passover and the festival of unleavened bread.

So when Jesus talks to the crowd about bread, he's triggering all sorts of powerful connections in their senses, as well as their minds, in their bodies, as well as in their hearts and souls, like the food memories we just chatted about. Jesus is talking about bread that meets their body's hunger. He's talking about bread that reminds of them of their ancestors with Moses in the wilderness. He's talking about bread that identifies them as the people of God, not like those awful pagan Romans and Greeks (and they were pretty awful, you know). And he's talking about bread that means freedom from slavery, salvation – the challah bread broken every Friday evening at the beginning of Shabbat, and the unleavened matzah bread broken at Passover.

So many memories, so much cultural resonance...

And you and I just thought he was talking about stuff you eat!

Well, he is. But it's worth remembering the power behind those traditional foods we eat, and the many, many meanings of bread for that crowd, because it should help us to understand what Jesus meant when he said some very shocking things, ending up with: 'The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh'.

PAUSE

'The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' You might know that some Roman writers spread the rumour about early Christians that they were cannibals. That's always a good way of talking down your enemies, but you can see where the misunderstanding came from. They had heard some garbled version of holy communion, and came up with: cannibalism! And people today can still find our worship, which centres around the body and blood of Christ, to be gruesome or gory. If we don't feel that way, it's because we understand it differently, and maybe also just because we're so used to it that we take it all a bit for granted.

Jesus tells us he is the Living Bread. We can use the story of the road to Emmaus to explain two ways that Jesus feeds us. If you remember that story, after Jesus' death two grieving disciples met Jesus on the road, without realising they were talking to their resurrected friend and Lord. After the event, they remembered two amazing things about that encounter: Jesus *fed* their minds and spirits in explaining how the Scriptures taught he would suffer, die and be glorified, and Jesus became *known to them* as he broke the bread. He fed their minds and spirits, became known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The points we can take from this are:

Jesus is *bread* because he has given his life for us on the cross, the sacrifice to save us.

Jesus is the bread of *life* because death cannot hold him, he is alive again, and he shares his new life with all of us who come to him in repentance and humility.

Jesus *feeds* us with the bread of life when, through the Holy Spirit, he feeds us with understanding of God's word.

We feed *on him*, in our hearts, with thanksgiving, as we eat the bread and drink the wine of Holy Communion.

So, are you hungry?

It's not a communion service today, because I'm a deacon, and deacons don't preside at Holy Communion. But if you remember what Father Martin said last week, deacons ARE servants of God's word – we share God's word with the people.

And here we are, being fed by Jesus, who gave his flesh for the life of the world. We're being fed when we listen to his word, as well as when we eat the communion bread. We are drawn to Jesus by our Father, and we feast on his *word* and on the bread and the wine.

You probably know the first of these apps, which help us to feed on God's word daily, but I thought I'd just mention the second one, Everyday Faith, which has been recently launched by the Church of England. I'm using them both at the moment, occasionally together on the same day, sometimes one or the other, and I think you might be interested in Everyday Faith which, as the name suggests, is about how we take the nourishment of God's word out into our everyday lives. You'll find links to both of these apps in the Friday email and on the church website, once this sermon is published there.

Everyday Faith: <https://www.churchofengland.org/faith-life/exploring-faith/everyday-faith>

Lectio 365: <https://www.24-7prayer.com/resource/lectio-365/>

So, are you hungry? Let me bring you back to someone I told you about, right at the beginning. That young man, the refugee who was living on the street, looked too well-presented for me to realise

the truth about his struggles. We can hide the truth from others, we can hide the truth from ourselves.

I wonder how hungry we are, as a society. One of the reasons I wonder is because of what happened when Dorota and I searched for songs about John 6:35-51 in our song lists. 'I am the bread of life... the bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh...': a key saying of Jesus. But could we find any songs about it?

I came up with the one I played at the beginning of this service, and one about thirst. Dorota found some about God providing for all our needs. But I wonder if hunger isn't something we want to think about, neither physical hunger, nor spiritual hunger. Are we, in general, so comfortably off that, unlike the crowds in Jesus' time, unlike the majority of the world ever since, we don't worry about 'our daily bread'? If so, we're dangerously dependent on ourselves, and we need to remember that all good gifts come from God.

PAUSE

Dorota and I also noticed that all the 'bread of life' songs we knew came from Catholic tradition. Does the Catholic focus on Mass as the central act of each Sunday worship remind them more powerfully of Jesus as the bread of life? If so, it's a good thing we live in a country, and in a time, when Christians of different denominations can worship together more freely. If we need our Catholic sisters and brothers to remind us that Jesus, the bread of life, has given his flesh for the life of the world, it's great that they're our neighbours, our families, our hosts and our friends.

So:

Are you hungry? Good. Come to Jesus – he says it's natural to be hungry. Come to him *daily* for your spiritual food. Eating once a week doesn't suit anybody – Jesus is ready to feed us every day, as his Holy Spirit guides in in reading his Word.

Are you hungry? Good. Come to worship. Jesus says his body is the bread, but Paul also points out that Christ's body is the church. In worshiping together, in encouraging, in challenging, maybe even in rubbing the rough corners off each other's personalities, we are fed.

Are you hungry? Good. Come to the table. Not this week – that's fine. But next Sunday, come with others of the body of Christ, because although we are many, we are one body, because we all share in the one bread.

Are *others* hungry? Good. You are ready. Fed by Christ through his gifts and his word, fed through the fellowship of the church and nourished by partaking in Holy Communion, we go out and feed others.

Let's bow our heads in prayer:

Lord Jesus, we are encouraged to be self-sufficient, and in general, that's good. Forgive us when we take that too far – if we believe that the modern world, and our own hard work, have removed the risk of hunger in our lives. The truth is, we are dependent on you for our daily bread. We are dependent on you for salvation, through your death on the cross. We are dependent on you for strength, wisdom and understanding through your resurrected power. We are hungry for your love, your salvation, and your strength in our lives. Feed us now, feed us always, in the power of your Holy Spirit.

Amen