

Sunday 2nd August 2009: Eighth Sunday after Trinity

The Bread of Life

Readings: Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

It is good to be reminded of the simplicity of a meal and the simplicity of a church.

In Laos (in South East Asia) children leave in the morning for school carrying small woven baskets with a woven lid, inside is their lunch - mostly rice, sometimes a few vegetables, occasionally a piece of fish or meat. At the start of a meal at home the traditional greeting, is 'kin kao' or *eat rice*. Monks and novices on their early morning ritual of alms gathering journey in a saffron coloured line, one by one, making their way through villages and towns in the early dawn light, collecting their food for the day. More often than not what is put into their alms bowls is a small ball of sticky rice. Sometimes a small sweet banana...rice is their staple food and often their only food. Sharing meals with families in this culture is a very humbling experience. It is a very simple and happy affair.

The Bread Church, which you may have heard of, is in Liverpool's city centre and was set up by a local Methodist minister Barbara Glasson. She went around the streets of Liverpool, meeting people and hearing their stories. She didn't ask them to church but asked them if they wanted to come and make bread. So they met and made bread and ate it and shared stories and prayed. In the act of gathering and making it, they themselves were kneaded together, and by entering into this simple act, a community developed and broken lives were repaired. A very simple church.

Simple meals. A simple church gathered. Sometimes all we need is to strip away what is complicated about our lives, our relationships, our food, even our church, all that makes for busyness and confusion and noise, and be reminded of what the real meaning and purpose is. Perhaps this holiday season is a good time to do that.

As I read the gospel passage for today, what at first appeared to be a complicated conversation between Jesus and the crowd, after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, revealed itself as a journey to simplicity.

Having seen the signs of healing that Jesus has performed, having eaten the bread, having followed and searched for him, the crowd now have to move out of the comfort zone of audience and observers, and find their own place in the drama that Jesus is living out before them and inviting them into. Discover who he really is – the meaning and purpose of *his* life. This journey into the drama is the same for us. Jesus draws us in too, to the real drama of our own lives.

He simply asks us like this crowd to take that step of knowing and trusting in his active presence among us. Somehow they find responding to this simple invitation a very difficult step to take. I don't know about you but I do too; like the crowd, holding back, offering all kinds of complicated excuses and hesitations.

Through the simple experience of eating and satisfying their physical hunger Jesus holds open a bigger picture of life to them. His conversation with the crowd is resonant of the one he has earlier in the gospel with the Samaritan woman at the well, he uses these ordinary things - water and bread - as doorways to open up to them the meaning of the life that is on offer. It is not just water from a well but *living water*, it is not just bread but *living bread* that he offers.

He helps them to strip away the surface things and brings them round to the simplicity of their own spiritual hunger and needs. A place we seem to find it very hard to come to. He says to them I have a kind of food and a way of eating that you do not know. If you want to satisfy your real hunger then simplify your life - let go of your own will and do the will of the Father who sent me.

The way to enter into the drama is not complicated, it is not about works, it is a way of the heart; about believing in God and the one whom he has sent. And it is a very present reality. He says to them ‘Moses may have *given* you bread from heaven but my father *gives* you this true bread from heaven – now’. Jesus reaches out to them across the barrier of their understanding...offering himself as that *living bread*. *I am the bread of life...the manna was only a shadow, this is the reality*¹. Take and eat...live my life, believe in me, enter into my drama, and come to know the real story of your own lives, satisfy your deepest longings.

The letter to the Ephesians shows us what living the reality of this drama of living bread is all about. It’s like the active bread-making of the church in Liverpool. We become the living bread and are kneaded together to be the life of Christ. To do this we have to acknowledge and respect our own gifts and the gifts of others and work at creating this life with them. Work through the strain and difficulties, the misunderstandings and hurt feelings and all our limitations. Working at it with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain unity and peace.

The differences between us take working at but should be welcomed and celebrated. There will always be reasons to distance ourselves from one another. The life of the Church is to be *found* in its growth together, holding difference and respecting it – even if you don’t understand it.

In Ephesians we see the ‘bigger picture’ for our lives that God holds out to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We are called to believe in him by living out his life, to hold his story or drama as the pattern for ours. *Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called*.

And this is the same calling for us. To a life, in Christ, that is bigger than anything we can be alone. The bigger picture that God is calling us to is not a land or a place, but a way of life with one another. If we have the courage and faith to look for the bigger story of our lives that God is holding out for us in Christ; trust him to lead us into it and through it, then we find that we have become part of His story of redemption – the “drama” of eternal life. The *living bread*.

If you go to the church of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, at Tabgha by the Sea of Galilee, at the place where the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is said to have taken place, you will find the well-known enigmatic mosaic of the loaves and the fish on the floor of the church in front of the altar. A naïve image of two fish set around a basket of loaves, in hues of worn colour of orange and brown. It is a very simple rendition of a momentous act.

Like the rice of the school children or monks in Laos, like the bread making church in Liverpool, like the image of unity that Ephesians gives us. What we are given is something simple.

The mosaic of the loaves and fish is made up of many small fragments. As a church we are a mosaic in our diversity. Together we make something outrageously simple. The body of

¹ *Augustine of Hippo, Homilies on the Gospel of John 26.13*

Christ. Many people in their own way and with their own gifts inhabiting one life. The life of Christ. A body that simply gives itself for the world.

Perhaps today as we continue to receive communion in one kind, in the bread, (in this period of the swine flu) we can receive it as a symbol of the simplicity of who we are. The simplicity of what Jesus offers to us. Nothing less than all of himself. And let our guard down. Let go of the excuses and questions and hesitations. Allow the drama of Christ's life and ours to be one...and simply believe in him.

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