

'I am the bread of life' John 6:51-58 Eynsford 19 August '18

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

We continue this morning with our sermon series on Bible passages to learn and live by, and I have chosen to preach on the reading from John's Gospel and Jesus' claim 'I am the bread of life.' Like many chapters in John's Gospel, chapter 6 is very long with 71 verses; but I would encourage you, in your own time, to read through the entire chapter. It begins with the Feeding of the 5,000 (vv 1-15), an important miracle that Jesus did, and the only one recorded in all four Gospels. Because of this miracle, the crowds followed him and caught up with him the next day on the other side of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum and Jesus took the opportunity to teach them what the miracle was really all about. He said to them:

'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.' (vv 26) (*NRSV, Collins*)

It's interesting and significant that the miracles in John's Gospel are always called signs – because they point beyond themselves to a deeper meaning, showing us the divinity of Christ and salvation through him. And instead of recording up to 21 miracles of Jesus, as do the other three evangelists, John records only 7 and follows these with long theological explanations of their meaning. Our reading this morning is part of one of these long discourses - on Jesus, the bread of life.

In verse 35 Jesus explains:

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

And from our reading this morning, in verses 53 Jesus says:

'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

When we hear this – and when the Gospel was written – Christians immediately think of taking Communion, where the bread represents Christ's body broken for us and the wine

represents his blood poured out for us. But looked at in the cold light of day, Jesus was making some very strange claims. And we hear in verse 52 that ...

‘The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’

And at the end of this chapter we hear that many of Jesus’ disciples turned back and no longer supported his movement. Indeed, historians tell us that early Christians were accused of cannibalism because they spoke about eating flesh and drinking blood.

But it’s surely clear to us that this is speaking about the sacrament of bread and wine, which we call Holy Communion or the Eucharist and we need to hear Jesus’ teaching in this context. So when we are told that we will never be hungry or thirsty again, we understand it as talking about spiritual satisfaction and eternal life.

When thinking and praying about this sermon, I asked myself ‘Why are the sacraments so important to me?’ And I concluded that it is because I respond well to the power of symbolism. There’s no denying that using signs and symbols is a fundamental part of being human. We smile and wave and clap and point from a very early age. We celebrate events with candles and fireworks and cake-cutting ceremonies. Human life is enriched with symbols and rituals, and nowhere more so than in religion. When I was an RE teacher, I wrote a school textbook on ‘The Christian Faith and its Symbols’, which gave me the opportunity to explore the role of symbols in Christianity. In the first chapter, I say this:

‘Before you can do any sums or read even the simplest map you need to learn the symbols used. This is also true of religion: you need to know its language if you are to understand it. / You will discover that symbolism affects the shape of a church building and the furniture inside. It affects the way people pray and the words they use. It affects the way they think about God and describe him to others. It affects the way people put across their religious ideas in paintings or music. It affects the colours, clothes and objects used in religious ceremonies and it affects the rituals, or actions, which are performed in religious services.’ *(p 11 pub. Hodder & Stoughton 2003, first published 1996)*

Of all these many Christian symbols, the sacraments are by far the most important - and particularly the two that were instituted by Jesus himself: baptism and communion. Jesus, being Jewish, knew all about the importance of symbolism, much of which took place around the family meal table, particularly at festival times. So it is not too surprising that, at the Last Supper, when Jesus and his closest disciples were celebrating the Jewish Passover Festival, Jesus took bread and wine and gave them special significance. This would be the last meal that he shared with his friends before his arrest and execution. But he left them, and all his followers down through the ages, physical symbols from everyday life to remember him by.

Sacraments are traditionally explained as 'Outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.' Grace being God's favour to us, most notably his gracious gift of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ. We distribute the bread and wine with the words "The body (or the blood), of Christ, keep you in eternal life.' It's not magic. It depends on our active, faithful response in receiving the free gifts that God offers us. As in John 6 verses 47 – 48 Jesus says:

'Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.'

.And in verse 51, Jesus says:

'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

It's the nature of symbols that – once you've been the key to their meaning - they speak for themselves and they affect us at a deep spiritual level. It's often difficult to put into words our religious experiences, and all I can say about taking Communion is that as I eat the consecrated bread and drink the wine, I am spiritually fed and I feel closer to Jesus. Verse 56 says:

'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.'

That is why I've quoted liberally from John chapter 6 – allowing Jesus' words to speak for themselves to each one of us.

Of course, we are all different and we respond to symbols differently - just as some people like heavy metal and others prefer folk music. In the course of my work for the Diocese, I came across Protestant Anglican churches that wouldn't even have candles in their church, for fear of idolatry; and Anglo Catholic churches that were more catholic than the Catholics in their love of statues and incense and ritual actions, like crossing themselves. Where some find help in religious symbolism, because it involves heart as well as head, others may find that they act as barriers in their worship of God. I always remember bringing my father to midnight mass here one Christmas and the rector wore a chasuble – like a cloak – with IHS embroidered on it. My Dad asked me what it meant and I explained that they were actually Greek letters – the first three letters of the Greek word for 'Jesus'. And his response, being a good Methodist, was 'Well, why doesn't it just say 'Jesus''! A case of symbolism obscuring rather than deepening meaning. And my brother is a Quaker who worships each week without any set liturgy or symbols.

Here at St Martin's, I believe we have a happy medium, with enough symbolism to enrich our service for those who want to go beyond words and reason. One of our practices is to offer anointing in the side chapel during communion. Some people get great peace from this and strength to deal with whatever is on their mind. We say the simple words:

'As you are anointed outwardly with this holy oil,
may you be anointed inwardly with God's Holy Spirit.'

If you think you would benefit from this personal blessing, I can recommend it. Or why not come up and light a candle as you pray? Another very powerful symbol, which ties in with another divine 'I am' saying of Jesus in John's Gospel, where he claims 'I am the Light of the world.' Both these symbols: the candles and anointing are on offer to everyone during communion or immediately after the service. There is also someone to pray with you if you want that.

Let us pray together now:

'Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,

Feed me now and evermore. Feed me now and evermore.' Amen

(Hymn: Guide me. O thou great Redeemer. W. Williams)

