

Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Trinity 2nd August 2015

©Susan Peatfield, Reader

We have recently been away and so returned home to a fridge and kitchen carefully emptied in preparation for our trip. Empty apart from what was lurking in the bread bin - a 16 day old loaf of Morrison's "Signature" organic brown sourdough bread. It appeared to have done the reverse of what Satan tempted Jesus to do in the desert. It had turned to stone. As I moved it carefully from the bread bin to the everything-else bin - it could have broken your foot if dropped - I remembered that I had left it there semi-on purpose.

We are the creatures of our upbringings and my mother had an aversion to throwing away "the staples". Old cake and biscuits could be jettisoned, but bread and milk only very reluctantly, if ever. To this day I can drink tea with milk that is euphemistically described as "on the turn" and I take bread rolls home from restaurants if we haven't eaten them all. In my handbag there are always crumbs.

In Western and Near Eastern cultures bread is the staple, the staff of life. Bread stands for so much as well as for itself. "Bread and circuses to keep the people happy" said the Romans. "Let them eat cake" said Marie Antoinette when there was a shortage of bread in Paris, with unhappy results for her at least. The bread of life (small *b* and small *l*) was an idea if not a phrase that existed long before Jesus uses it in our Gospel account today.

This is of course really Episode 2 of the readings we heard last week, and Harold's thoughtful response to them in his sermon. We heard today the account of God providing for his people in the Wilderness years after the Exodus manna just enough for each person for each day, and in the Gospel reading Jesus is teaching the people after the wonderful feeding of the Five Thousand, when five simple barley loaves and two fish become a miraculous shared picnic for all the hungry people who have followed him.

There are two key temptations associated with Bible study. Neither of them should always be resisted by any means, but it is always important to be aware of them. The first is less common in our tradition. It is the temptation to read every word of the Bible literally. It is an approach very evident in certain positions on creation, but also in understandings of the roles of men and women in the church and what actually takes place at the Eucharist. The second temptation is much more common in more liberal traditions, and that is to skip briefly over what is literally on the page with an eye to the "real meaning" or "what it stands for". In our Gospel passage this is not a temptation - it is an invitation. We are invited to look beyond the bread and fish because Jesus himself points us to what the sign of the feeding means. The sharing of himself with the world. The gift and the offering of God himself.

I do not think though that this teaching is asking us to forget the face value of what has just happened, just to see more deeply into it The feeding of five thousand hungry people. For in this story the first thing is not bread but hunger. Really hungry people, spiritually yes, certainly, but also actually hungry. This came very powerfully into focus for me this week,

when I read of a migrant arriving in the UK. He explained the extraordinary rigours of his journey and ended by very simply saying "We are hungry." Yes, for asylum, yes, for hope, but actually, immediately, this minute, for something to eat.

Look at the order of events in this section of John's Gospel. People hear that Jesus has been healing the sick so they follow him across the Sea of Galilee. As time passes they become hungry and there is no obvious means of providing food for them. Jesus provides a miraculous meal after blessing all that is to hand: five loaves and two fish. Jesus explains that he is the Bread of Life.

Now imagine it in a different order and with a key element missing. Jesus heals the sick, the people follow him and become hungry. Jesus explains that he is the Bread of Life.

Perhaps I am being unfair to those gathered that day, but based on my own and my family's metabolisms, memories of the healings and beautiful words about eternal bread might fight against simple bodily hunger. And hunger might win.

This is not because Jesus's words are not true and real and saving, but because we are human. And Jesus above all knew and knows that, and so the order of events is as it is. Jesus feeds the crowd, each and every one of them, with actual bread, before explaining what they truly have seen and received. So it is that when members of the crowd say to him "Sir, give us this bread always" they do indeed glimpse the truth of what they have just been invited to share.

Our parish, like most others, faces many challenges in the months and years ahead. We will struggle to discern where our own emphasis should be. What are our priorities? What must we do first? What must we do always? We are to be Christ in this place, to lead others to him and to see him in all with whom we have to do.

And I believe in this we should keep not only the message but also the order of the events in this Gospel close to our hearts. Man cannot live by bread alone. But not "just bread" does not mean "no bread". At the heart of all we are and all we have received is to "freely give." We will have to work and pray hard to decide what that looks like here and today. But one thing we know: first he fed them and *then* he fed them.

Amen.