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The True Bread of Life (John 6: 35, 41–51)

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It's all very cinematic, isn't it? The scene is the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a sizeable lake the locals know as great for fishing. A large and no doubt motley crowd has gathered in the wake of this intriguing figure who some people are saying might be the long-desired Prophet of the ancient texts. Word has got around of some weird things happening: a huge mob, said to number around 5,000, has sat down to a literally marvellous feast the likes of which doesn't come around too often. And somehow this Jesus bloke has apparently managed to travel from one side of the lake to the other afterwards without being seen to enter a boat at the shore. Who is this magician, and what could it all mean?

The crowd clamours for answers from the man himself. And Jesus's take-away message causes it all to kick off: 'I am the bread of life.' People start to turn to each other and, we are told, begin to 'murmur' – to complain: 'Hang on, hang on, we know this guy's mum and dad! How can he say he comes from heaven?' Like the mother of Brian in the Monty Python film, more than one of them is dying to utter the line, "He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy." The doubt is the presage of a not insignificant turning away in the near future: not only has Jesus lost most of his large crowd of interested onlookers by the end of this chapter of John, but we are told also that even "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66).

The question is, though: would we have been any different? Aren't we inclined, also, when the claims on us start sounding a bit irksome, a bit over-demanding, to turn away and decide the game is not worth the candle? We might be inclined, smugly, to recognise that this crowd in John 6 seems to have learned nothing from the self-serving 'murmuring' of the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus when they doubted God (being, as you will remember, rewarded with manna from heaven), but aren't we also quick to condemn life when it doesn't always give us exactly what we want?

It's not as if Jesus makes this any easier. He clearly wants to stress the 'nothing less than all' commitment he is asking of anyone who wishes to follow him. Immediately preceding this passage, and after the walking-on-water episode, he calls those fascinated by him on their primary motivation for being so: "you seek me," he says, "not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (v. 26). But, in our reading today, he is making it clear that that kind of bread is not true nourishment. When the people ask Jesus to promise to provide them with 'bread from heaven' ever after, Jesus ups the ante. He isn't just going to hand out such bread as from a bakery; instead he identifies with the bread itself and equates receiving him 'in the flesh' with realising eternal life. It is a stunning statement; no wonder the people afterwards immediately start arguing what it might mean.

The issue that immediately interests me is what it practically means to eat the bread of life. How do we go about doing this, and what are the implications? Now Sarah has helpfully pointed me towards a Girardian theologian, Paul Nuechterlein, in beginning to try to answer these questions. In preaching on this very passage, Nuechterlein sets the notion of the Bread of Life in relief by examining what a bread of death might look like. Taking his cue from the temptations of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, he suggests that we are similarly tempted to overcome our 'wilderness times' by what he calls 'famished cravings' – addictions to power, substances like food, drink and drugs and violence to ourselves and those around us.

In such ways, therefore, we seek to provide our own miracles as solutions to take ourselves out of our own often painful and what feels like limited view of reality. We can be driven by what feels like very powerful impulses to gather to ourselves more and more: I can finally be happy if I achieve that position at work, go on that long-awaited holiday to a tropical paradise or hit the thousand friends mark on Facebook. And yet, on scaling these peaks, are we not simply left dissatisfied and hungry for more? Do we not have a continuous hunger to reach higher ground?

It is interesting that immediately after the feeding of the 5,000, higher ground is precisely what Jesus seeks. Escaping the clamour of those whose eyes are filled with stars after what they have received from him, Jesus, we are told, ascends a mountain to be alone. It is as if he is illustrating in his example the fact that the 'miracle' of everyday existence-serving staples like bread and fish are by no means enough. To reach higher ground he, and we, need to enter our inner room inside us and feed on the true nourishment of God within. That is the true Bread of Life. It sounds like a good solution: all we need to feed on the Bread of Life is to remove ourselves from the grubbiness of the everyday world and have wonderfully spiritual experiences of a largely private nature (perhaps with a few like-minded contemplatives who really 'get it' too) and every manner of thing shall be well. We will have eaten of Jesus, and we will, as he says, 'not die'.

Except, of course, that it is no solution at all. Speaking for myself, I know that when I have tried to concentrate on 'peak experiences' at the expense of living in the ordinary, things have begun to go dreadfully wrong. In trying to circumvent the need to explore the darker aspects of my own life and to not face the more difficult aspects of the world around me, I have been eventually brought to earth with a jarring jolt by my attempted casual lack of concern. So, if it is not a case of on the one hand seeking material things to fill us to satiety, or on the other bypassing the world and its more complicated realities, how do we accept this Bread of Life in a way that leads to eternal life and to the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth? How do we accept Jesus in the 'no-compromise' way he is asking us to in this chapter of John's gospel?

Perhaps the problem is that in striving to achieve the 'eternal' part of the metaphor of the Bread of Life, we can be tempted to try to discount the bread part? And perhaps also we can tend to forget where this Bread actually comes from? It seems to me that it is not for nothing that Jesus seeks to illustrate his truths through material means and everyday experiences. The gospels have Jesus use many metaphors, such as fruit, salt, wine and light, to try to explain to the people the implications possible beyond those simple things. And

yet, it is not as if we are supposed to discount the divinity within those everyday objects. Just as Jesus is both God and man, God-Spirit and flesh, so we are supposed to see bread – the staff of life – as miraculously ordinary. If God is truly within every atom in the universe, then we can enter the Kingdom by acknowledging that this divinity is in every experience we have. Thus we can be fully grounded in our human existence and be aware of the divine in every situation if we choose to really attend in a trustful manner.

To do this we have to, as meditation teacher David Frenette says, trust that everything is held in the experience of God. And this is true of our struggles too. There is no need to be carried away by the anxious parts of ourselves towards addictive substances or experiences – to eat the bread of death – if we are able to accept that nothing, including our turmoil, is held outside the love of God. In fact, as I have seen time and again in the counselling work I do, it is actually through trusting that the difficult experiences we have gone through contain vital and potentially transformative information that we can grow in understanding and depth of character. It is consent to the trust, as Frenette puts it, that “the gift of what is is the gift of God” that can give us a powerful and calm certainty that everything in life is included. The gift of what is is the gift of God – and that means the depths as well as the heights of life.

All this is to say that the most helpful everyday attitude we can hold is one of openness, inclusion and non-resistance. As we say in the Lord’s Prayer, accepting our ‘daily bread’ is about an openness to seeing God all around us. Even in the gloomiest of days, when nothing seems to be going right and our mood is deeply clouded, it is about being willing to accept that these experiences, too, necessarily contain a truth about them – albeit that we may not be able to see it when we are so close to the dismay, discomfort or pain. Trust at such a time seems counterintuitive, and yet embracing God in the discomfort can be curiously liberating.

Nonetheless, how do we consistently hold true to living life in this perspective? The crowds who followed Jesus, and many of his disciples too, slid away quickly enough when it looked like the good things weren’t always going to come their way, or when they couldn’t by their very human reasoning, work out what Jesus was saying. Why should we be any different? Perhaps the key is in the verse with which Jesus rebukes those who claim to know his parents and therefore distrust his divinity: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (v. 44). The doubters presume that, despite their extraordinary evidence to the contrary, Jesus is merely human. Jesus, though, makes it clear that the divine-human exchange is an active process throughout. We can only come to God, and therefore to the eternal life that Jesus offers, if we accept that God is the instigator of that possible opportunity. And it is only by assent, and consent, to that notion that we can fully accede to the presence of God within us. In other words, it is not all about our own efforts – phew!

In practical terms, if all we want from Jesus is a succession of miracles to take us out of our impoverished lives, we end up not sticking with the journey. Like many of the people at the Sea of Galilee, we end up abdicating responsibility for taking ownership of what is already and gloriously in us – the image and likeness of God. In telling the crowds that right now he is the Bread of Life, he is telling us that we don’t need to look for further signs and wonders.

Right now, he seems to be saying, those wonders are all around, and within, us. By trusting in Jesus and accepting this high calling in ourselves too, we can realise fully the promise we are born into. Faith, in essence, seems to be a willingness to believe that we are the flour, water and yeast that is kneaded, wonderfully and in ways we cannot fully grasp, by God. And nothing less will do.