

2 August 2009; 5 August 2012 The Bread of Life

Exodus 16, 2-4; 9-15; Ephesians 4, 1-16; John 6, 24-35

Last Wednesday, the 1st August, was Lammass Day, that is, Loaf Mass Day. In the early church it was the custom to consecrate bread made from the first-ripe corn at mass on this day in thanksgiving for the harvest. In those times, if the harvest failed and there was no bread, then starvation might well have stared you in the face. Today, if the supermarket has run out of bread, it's rather easier - we just go back tomorrow for the next delivery. But even if we do gorge on physical bread, has all our hunger been satisfied? Our real hunger.

When Moses fed the Israelites, they still complained that they were being tested. They were greedy and took a double portion on one day, with the result that they starved on the next. Some people are just never satisfied. Bread and circuses were enough to keep the Roman masses quiet, but perhaps little more than just maintaining the status quo.

Can you imagine yourself as being one of the 5,000 who were fed on five loaves and two fishes? It must have been a tremendous sight for so many to have been physically filled, and still for twelve baskets full of scraps to be left over. And yet, and yet, still even they were still not satisfied. They mistook one bread for another. All the people could do was to see Jesus as the old Moses, just acting out a reworking of history.

Clearly they had forgotten or didn't know that Jesus said "Before Abraham was, I am." This was not old bread, but a new and very different kind. But how easy it is to cling to the old and reject the new. The manna of the exodus was now the bread of life, and the water of the rock was now the spring of living water welling up to eternal life.

I wonder what your view of the past and the present is? Are you in the one or the other, or perhaps more likely, travelling mentally back and forth between the two? Or are you stuck in one and wishing you were in the other? We humans like to dream by day and by night, and love to escape from what we don't like and fantasise about what we haven't got.

Peter Pan never quite grew up, and stayed a child. Those who idolised Elvis Presley sought to place their hero in a land that never was and never could be – a land locked into the limitations of time passing away.

Some of the thousands of fans of Michael Jackson will want to freeze their hero and his achievements into the fantasy of Neverland – and stay there themselves.

It is said that after the death of Princess Diana the *Daily Express* printed something about her every day for literally years. Those readers might have been satisfied in one thing, but they were surely starving in other ways.

Jesus always saw bread as an important symbol, but he also never saw any great divide between physical hunger and spiritual hunger. He knew that without bread people go hungry, and to feed the hungry was hugely important to him. And so at that fishy picnic on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias, fish and bread were enough to feed the tired and hungry fishermen and all the other people. But, as the saying goes, man cannot live by bread alone. People cannot concentrate on spiritual things when their stomachs are empty. Jesus moved cleverly to cater for their physical needs before supplying the spiritual ones.

A Russian Orthodox theologian once said “Bread for myself is a material problem, but bread for other people is a spiritual problem”. Today we rarely experience real hunger, but feeding the hungry in Zimbabwe or in the Sudan or in Ethiopia, to take just three countries, remains for us Christians a spiritual matter and a spiritual duty. And for the charities involved it is a huge and never-ending world problem. Europe and North America groan under the weight of food mountains while other continents go starving.

Feed the body and feed the soul. And so Jesus rightly called himself the bread of life. Once you have saved yourself from the pangs of physical hunger, you can concentrate on something much more important – saving your soul. But after the feeding of the 5000, the people asked Jesus a question which amounted to “What time was the ferry you caught across the lake?” Yes, they had been fed something to fill their stomachs with, and now they hoped his divine power would produce enough food to sustain a Jewish empire. How mistaken they were, but could they see the error of their ways? Their full-up stomachs were a sign to them of physical satisfaction, but alas, not much more than that

If we live only to feed our physical bodies, then the unpalatable truth is that we are already dead before the day that we stop breathing. St Augustine knew that we should eat to live, and not live to eat.

The effort to secure eternal life requires a great deal more preparation and thought and action. But the palatable truth is that it is offered to us, to you and to me – it's there for the taking if we are prepared to go the extra mile. It's up to us to believe in the divine messenger, throw away that junk diet and go for the enduring and imperishable food.

Christ for us is no miracle-leader to a new earthly kingdom – that's all past now – he beckons us to God's wisdom.

We are no longer children to be tossed about by trickery or guile or shallow advertising or false prophets – we are the called people who have to live in ways which promote the unity of the church and its ideal character. We have to live in mutual tolerance and mutual love. And as different as we all are, with our highly individual characteristics and capabilities, we must still try to work in unity, using the gifts we have all received in our own different ways. We have to share our belief and our knowledge, and not go astray into a vast jumble of other beliefs. We have to uphold the truth in a spirit of love.

Once the body has been fed, then so must the soul. That is why our Lord described himself as “The Bread of Life”. He sustains us spiritually, and without him our souls wither and die. Look around at the well-fed and well-housed and well-clothed people in society – can you see their starving and emaciated souls? If they did but know it, Jesus is the Bread of Life.

And so for us it is hardly surprising that in the Upper Room on that first Maundy Thursday Jesus took bread and gave it to his disciples and said “Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me”. The wafer which you will receive this morning symbolises Christ's gift of himself to you, Christ the living bread. The bread speaks of the living Lord, just as it did at that first Eucharist on Easter Day at Emmaus.

In the eucharist Jesus invites us to live at a point halfway between earth and heaven, where time is captured and transcended by eternity. In the symbolism a new meaning is revealed and a new life that is not bound by history – a vision of a whole and perfect life – the life we must all strive for. So when Jesus was asked what ferry he had caught across the lake, he didn't just reminisce and tell old stories from the past – he used actions and powerful symbols to break out of time into eternity, and out of death into life. That bread with the old sell-by date was now gone for ever.

Can we be brave and ditch the security of the material world? If we hang on to an Elvis Presley or a Michael Jackson and try to perpetuate the cult and style of their time and culture, it will soon be a bygone age, or already is one. Christ challenges us not to be hooked on the past – there is no more manna in the desert.

There's a story about a church where over the chancel arch facing the people were the words "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". That is the great invitation to the altar. But when the people had received, and turned to go back to their seats they saw on the other side of the arch the words of the Great Commission "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature". Can we respond to that Great Invitation and carry out the Great Commission? If we can, then the living bread will bring life to the world.

Let us pray for that bread, the timeless bread, the bread which lives and gives life. It's not of our imagining but of the Spirit's making. There's no point in our trying to dissect it and see what it's composed of – we can't find the truth that way. Only our faith can comprehend this wondrous matter, and then draw life from it.

