

# The Bread of Life ...

## *... the joy and abundance of life that Jesus offers*

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*A sermon given on the on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.*

*John 35, 41-51*

Now, for those that were here last week, Wendy started her talk by asking if you could be any animal at all, what kind of animal would you be? I also want to ask a question, but perhaps it's a much shallower and less profound question than that. It's this: are you a starter person or a pudding person? Maybe you know what I mean instantly. It's summer holiday season. In our family one of the things that we enjoy to do when we're on holiday is to go out to a few restaurants for an occasional meal to sample some of the local cuisine. But there's always that crucial question after they've seated us at our table and the menus have been handed out: 'Who's going to have a starter then?' This is probably one area where my wife Charlotte and I most often disagree. You see, she is much more of a pudding person than a starter person, whereas I would quite happily forego the sweet treats at the end of the meal for something savoury and interesting at the beginning. So sometimes we just have to agree to disagree and some of the family will have a starter and some will have a pudding and the others just have to sit on their drinks while their food is being served and enjoyed.

This is, of course, a first world problem, I know. But then of course there's the bread. As a family, we all love our bread and when at the start of the meal the bread is delivered by the waiter or waitress to the table, especially if it's some lovely warm freshly baked bread, there's always that temptation to have too many pieces and find yourself filling up on this lovely bread even before the rest of the food has had a chance to arrive. Now, the bread clearly isn't meant to be the be-all and end-all of the meal.

Now, that may even sound slightly heretical to say that the bread isn't the be-all and end-all of the meal just next to those words that we've heard from Jesus when he says, "*I am the bread of life.*" But there are key differences as to how we view bread today and how it was viewed, and the function that it served, when Jesus spoke those words. Whereas we might view the bread at the start of a meal as an optional extra, there, it was an absolute essential, not just for sustaining life as it was for the manna given to the Israelites in the desert, but it also played a very important and functional role in the meal.

Some years ago, I attended a mediaeval banquet in one of the old merchant trade halls in York. At the start of the meal, they told us that we weren't going to be given any plates. Instead, we were all given what looked like a gigantic bread roll about this diameter, and that was placed down in front of us. And we were told, please don't eat this before the food arrives because this giant bread slab was going to be our plate - it was going to be the surface on which all other food was to be served. Now, in a similar way, in Jesus's time, the bread wasn't a starter: it was the means by which you were able to eat the rest of the food - meals weren't eaten with utensils, no knives and forks, but instead you ate with your hands using the bread as a utensil, as a scoop by which you could pick up and eat the rest of the food. Jesus even describes this in the Last Supper, when he identifies his betrayer, Judas, as the one who is 'dipping' the bread into the bowl with me. Bread was the knife and fork of its day. No one could eat and enjoy the meal without bread.

One Sunday school teacher once asked the assembled children, "Now class, what is brown and furry and collects nuts for the winter?" One of the children responded, "Well, it does sure sound like a squirrel, but is it Jesus? Isn't Jesus always the answer, whatever the question?" Well, no. Sometimes we become so used to saying that Jesus is the answer that we forget what he is the answer to, and the reason why he came. At the start of his ministry Jesus said, "*The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news.*" But stop and think for a moment, what was this good news? Was the good news simply, "I'm here" declared Jesus. Or was it that through Jesus there was something else on offer? Just as the bread was the means by which the meal could be eaten, when Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life*", he is saying that he is the bread through which life can be had, and life can be enjoyed. Later, in John 10, Jesus says this, "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*". So through Jesus, we have the possibility of a restored relationship with the one who made us and entering into that abundant and eternal life. Jesus himself makes that point in our gospel by saying as the bread of life compared to the manna given to the Israelites, 'They ate it and they still died.' Whereas he says, 'Those that is of the bread of life will never die.'

So to focus on Jesus alone and not to see the life that he is pointing towards, what he is enabling and offering us to do, is a bit like enjoying the bread as a starter and never, ever moving on to the main course. We must avoid circular reasoning that simply spins on the spot. We don't worship Jesus because we worship Jesus. We worship Jesus because of who he was, God incarnate, but importantly of what he did and what that opens up for us.

So today we could ask ourselves the question, 'Are we stuck on the starter?' Perhaps you're not even at that stage and you're still just perusing the menu, but importantly, I want to ask, 'Are we missing out on the main course?' Are we missing the joy and the abundance of the life that Jesus as the bread of life is offering to us as his followers?

So as we celebrate the communion today and to share in the one bread in the meal that Jesus gave us, that invitation to life is once again remembered and freely offered. And as for what's for pudding? Well, that would be the subject of a whole other sermon.

# Reading Text

John 6.35, 41-51

<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

<sup>41</sup> Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' <sup>42</sup> They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. <sup>44</sup> No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup> Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> 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.'