

The Bread of Life

A sermon given on Twelfth Sunday After Trinity, 22nd August 2021, by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in the Online Attended Communion Service

John 6:56-69

So I invite you to have a think just for a moment, and think about something you've done that was really hard, something that you chose to do and set out to do, but perhaps then discovered that the reality was tougher than you'd first imagined. You might be one of those lock-down people who started on the couch to 5K, picturing yourself running gazelle-like in just a few weeks; perhaps you began your dream job only to discover that it took every fibre of your being just to stay afloat; I'm aware that any of our young people -they've all disappeared, but who took exams this year already knew they would be hard, but were made so much harder by the pandemic, and the temptation to give up must have been great.

But when I was pondering this and there are lots of things I could have thought of, but I thought about the time when I took a class of children on an activity holiday and I spent a long time building them up to the fact they needed to be very brave and to take risks and to work as a team. And having done all this, I found myself at the top of a high rope adventure course, being expected to put my money where my mouth was. Now I look quite cheerful in that picture, if you can see that - it didn't last for long because this wasn't a nice little stroll around at height: you had to leap over great big drops. And genuinely, the eleven year olds were running around screaming, blindfolded, having the time of their life, whilst I still stood there staring at this huge gap. And if I hadn't been tied on by a rope, I would have been back down on the ground like a shot.

In the last of our four passages (that if you've been here for all of August - they've all been exploring different ideas about bread - and in this last one) the disciples come to the conclusion that Jesus's teaching is really hard, and like the Israelites in the wilderness, they start to grumble. Jesus is explaining that he's not just a great leader or a miracle worker - if you were here just for the free food, then look elsewhere - he is inviting people to accept the hard thing, 'to eat my 'and drink my blood and abide in me.' Now this is a hard thing for us to understand and were beyond his death and

resurrection and ascension. But Jesus, early in his Ministry, is painting pictures, dropping hints and teaching this long before it actually happened: he is claiming to be the new Exodus, the Liberator, the bread of Heaven, the Great 'I am', the Messiah.

And it's one thing to listen to a new leader and to entertain new ideas, especially when the crowds are cheering, the demons are fleeing, the illnesses are being healed and the storms are calming. It's quite another to have your entire worldview blown to pieces and to accept one man's claim to be God. Jesus recognises that his words will offend, and the fact that many will need the help of the Holy Spirit to truly believe; he names the fact he will be deserted and betrayed as his journey continues. Many of his disciples turned back. It was too difficult. So Jesus then asks the twelve if they wish to walk away too. But like that rope that kept me up in the air, the disciples are held to Jesus by all that they have come to understand. Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy one of God."

This is a powerful moment. It is clearly not the end of the journey for the disciples - the road remains difficult. Their belief is tested again and again. But for them something has clicked.

When I was a teenager, I used to attend a youth group, and one of my friends there died very suddenly, aged 17, from a brain haemorrhage. And at her funeral I can remember somebody asking her mother if her faith had been shaken and how she could accept that God had allowed this terrible loss. And her words, her response, have always stuck with me. She said, "Of course I've tried to run from God, but everywhere I go, His open arms are there to catch me."

We all face difficult things, far harder than braving a high ropes course, things that perhaps shatter our world view and how we've always understood God. The past 18 months have turned us all upside down, and we haven't really been able to recover and reflect yet. And yet with the situation in Afghanistan and the earthquake in Haiti and the shooting in Plymouth, we could be tempted to walk away from Jesus, to turn from our faith. And I know that many people are having to re evaluate and think afresh about what Jesus being the bread of life means to them. Like the crowd, we could walk away. But if we know that we are attached to the rope, even if we can't see it, if we felt His loving arms when we reached the end of ourselves, we can join

the disciples in trusting the one who has the words of eternal life. He will always be with us, however difficult it feels, however far we've run, and however many times we've wanted to give up.

Behold, I am with you always, even until the end of the age"

I have a short prayer poem to conclude our reflections on bread that you might like to echo in your own heart

*When the journey is long
and we hunger and thirst,
Bread of Life, you sustain us.*

*When the road is hard
and our bodies weak
Bread of Life, you heal us.*

*When our spirits are low
and we can't carry on
Bread of Life, you revive us.*

*When we offer our hand
in love and in service
Bread of life, you bless us.*

*When the challenge is great
and the workers are few
Bread of Life, you empower us.*

*When the victory is won
and we see your face
Bread of Life, you will rejoice with us!*

Reading Texts

John 6:56-69

⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." ⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."