

# Nothing But???

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*A sermon given on the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 11th August 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*John 6:35, 41-51*

I dare say there are many in the congregation this morning who are wearing a wedding ring and if you are wearing a wedding ring, would you like to just wave your hand in the air? Yes, there's quite a few; quite a few - Good - Thank you - Hands down. My question for you is, 'How might you describe your wedding ring?' A scientist, particularly a chemist, might describe the element gold: that it has a particular weight; a particular composition of atoms and molecules; that it has a measurable shape; that it can be observed, measured, and analysed. Or a jeweller confronted with a wedding ring might say, 'Yes, well, that's a piece of jewellery; you wear it on your ring finger' - it might have a hallmark that tells you who made it and where and details about its design. But for the person who's wearing the ring and for their spouse, a ring represents something quite different - it represents a marriage. It speaks of a particular relationship, and it's a physical reminder of a particular occasion when certain promises were exchanged in a certain context. It's worn on the third finger of the left hand as a sign that that individual belongs to another and that they're married. Now, the three different insights of scientist, jeweller, and spouse are all perfectly valid. They're all true. But most people, when they see a wedding ring, see it in terms of that third category - they see it as a sign of a relationship. To hear a wedding ring described as 'nothing but' a lump of gold is to leave one feeling that somehow the point has been missed.

Now, in our gospel reading this morning, we hear an example of this 'nothing but'ery. Confronted by Jesus, the Son of God, people said, *'Is not this Jesus, the Son of Joseph, whose Father and Mother we know? How then can he say, "I have come down from heaven?"'* But of course, in one sense, they're perfectly correct - Jesus is the son of Joseph, and they do know his earthly father and mother. But is that really all that can be said about Jesus? Might there not be a bit more to it that could be said about him? Might there be other levels of meaning that could be applied to him?

The Jewish leaders were looking at Jesus but only seeing one level of significance or meaning and as a result, they were not open to seeing other levels of significance. If you like, they saw the man, but they missed the saviour. It's a very common mistake that people make. It's easy to see life and the world in a reductionist way. We would think it's strange to describe a Brandenburg concerto as 'nothing but' the drawing of the hair of one animal over the guts of another. But a lot of people do have a tendency to see the concerto of life and this amazing complex world as 'nothing but' an accident of evolution, a random collection of atoms and electrical impulses. Or it's easy to see the world as 'nothing but' a kind of glorified supermarket whose contents are merely there to be consumed.

In Jesus's ministry, we see time and again people confronted with evidence that he is more than just an ordinary man, but they refuse to go where the evidence points and often what we see is one level of meaning, but no more. Those whose minds are closed see 'nothing but' Jesus, the Son of Joseph. But those whose minds are open might dare to believe there is more to Jesus than that. As a 12th century Archbishop of Canterbury, St Anselm, once put it, 'I do not understand in order to believe. I believe in order to understand.' In other words, true understanding comes from

openness to the possibility of there being further levels of meaning. In many ways that's what faith is, simply an openness to the possibility that there might be more to life than meets the eye.

In the passage in the gospel reading Jesus quotes the prophets saying, *'They Shall all be taught by God.'* That is, all truth in the end comes from God; everything worth knowing is at some level mysterious because it is rooted in the eternal, infinite God. Everything worth knowing requires some act of faith, of trust that this is right and makes sense. The scientist trusts that the universe has patterns and rhythms and regularity that make it worth investigating, even though we only know a tiny fraction of what we might know about the universe. The scientist trusts that the scientific community has the tools and the methods that will yield greater knowledge. But it's an act of faith. It requires great openness. *'They shall all be taught by God'* - meaning that however much we know, there is much that remains unknown. And the more we know, the more mysterious our lives become. And the more we discover about the universe, the more mysterious it becomes.

So the process of discovering truth requires great openness and trust, which isn't helped when people are too literal-minded or insist on seeing only one level of meaning. And there's a number of examples in John's gospel. Jesus says, *"No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."* Nicodemus, the Pharisee, says, *"What do you mean? How can you climb back into your mother's womb to be born again?"* And Jesus is like, 'Duh, don't you recognise a metaphor when you hear one.' And here in this passage, we have Jesus saying, *"I am the bread of life, the bread that comes down from heaven."* And the Jewish leaders are saying, 'What do you mean? You're not a loaf of bread. You haven't dropped out of the sky.' They are the original fundamentalists, taking everything literally in a wooden, two-dimensional way. It's amazing how the most common fundamentalist is the hard-boiled atheist. So many atheist writers, such as Richard Dawkins, read the Bible literally so that they can make fun of it and dismiss it as nonsense. But what they're not always realising is that the words are metaphors - this is picture language pointing to deeper levels of meaning; it's a poetry trying to describe something mysterious because it's not easily described and it can't easily be seen. Atheists, and indeed, sometimes Christians, are so busy looking at the lump of gold that they fail to see the wedding ring. Jesus isn't a loaf of bread dropped from the sky, but those who receive him, who are open to him and trust him, find themselves spiritually nourished. They find that there is something here deeply and richly sustaining in that attitude of openness.

And the only way to describe it is it's like being drawn into the presence of the one we call the Father; the source of life; the source of love and of meaning; a sense of being in the presence of the one who makes everything worthwhile and meaningful; who turns the base metal into a meaningful ring of life and a relationship of love.

So as you receive the bread and wine today, don't see it as 'nothing but' a bit of wafer and a little drink: be open to the mystery of the Father; receive not just the Son of Joseph, but the Son of God; the living bread that came down from heaven; that whoever eats of this bread might live forever.

# 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.'