

1st August 2021: John 6:24-35

How much bread do you reckon you might eat in a typical day? Well, apparently, for the average British person, it's about 100 grammes, or 3 or 4 slices.

And astonishingly (I thought), 'cooked bread' (toast) came out 'number one' in a survey a few years ago of our favourite 'feel good' foods – somehow beating blackberry and apple crumble, and even chocolate! Perhaps that 'win' might be connected to the further result that "the lovely aroma of fresh toast" is our favourite 'food smell'...

But this fondness for bread sadly doesn't seem to extend to making sure we always make the most of it, because about one-third of the bread we buy ends up getting thrown away. That's a figure which would seem incredulous to someone like Jean Valjean (out of *Les Misérables*), eventually spending 19 years in jail after stealing a loaf of bread in desperation to feed his sister and her hungry children.

So, bread is one of the traditional 'staple foods' – which, according to the NHS (and I promise this is the last in my little run of statistics), are supposed to make up at least one-third of our overall diet.

Small wonder then that 'bread' features a lot in Jesus's words and actions – including in our Gospel reading today, and following on from the passage Liz spoke about last week... ...when we had the 'feeding of the 5000', out on the east side of the Sea of Galilee (that's the far side relative to where most of Jesus' ministry took place).

Mark's account (rather than John's) tells us that the reason Jesus was over there was to get away with his disciples by boat for some peace and quiet, but a large crowd runs round the shoreline after him (5 miles perhaps, maybe a bit more), and gets there first – so Jesus ends up teaching them (at length) until it gets so late he decides they need some food.

After which he sends the disciples back across the lake (on their own) in the one-and-only boat. The crowd notices this and beds down somehow for the night, assuming Jesus is still (somewhere) there too.

But in the morning he's nowhere to be found, and of course they're puzzled – it wouldn't have occurred to them that he might have walked back across the top of the waves in order to join up again with his disciples!

Fortunately, though, some boats turn up, and they're able to hop on board and go and look for Jesus back on the western side of the lake... ...where they duly find him at Capernaum (which at that point was his 'home' town), and ask: "how on earth did you get here?" – setting Jesus off on a long (and important) discourse, of which today's reading is just the first part.

And in these verses Jesus strikes a pretty critical tone as he identifies three big mistakes the crowd are making in how they view him. Let's look at each of those now.

First, Jesus pinpoints why it is they're so keen to follow him around: "Very truly, you are looking for me... because you ate your fill of the loaves". They'd concluded they were onto a 'good thing' – here was someone who could provide all their material needs! What's not to like?

And we too can so easily see faith in Christ as something to ‘bring us benefits’ – a ‘guarantee’ that he will meet all our (reasonable) desires.

But the ‘prosperity gospel’ (the idea that being a Christian entitles us to expect prosperity) gets well-and-truly knocked on the head in the Old Testament (the story of Job makes that clear), gets knocked on the head here by Jesus, and remains fundamentally misguided today – even though there may be plenty of preachers (mostly but not entirely from across the pond) who might try to tell us otherwise.

Of course that doesn’t mean that God won’t supply our needs. But if we ask for better health, we may instead receive greater patience to bear affliction; if we ask for more money, we may see an increase in our ability to manage well with less; and if we ask for our problems to be taken away, we may just get given a greater gift of perseverance.

In the end (as Jesus makes clear), what matters is not food (or anything else) that perishes, but “food that endures for eternal life” – the ‘nourishment’ that comes out of a true relationship with him.

As Jesus says elsewhere (in the Sermon on the Mount), it’s not “treasure on earth” that counts, but “treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and thieves do not break in and steal”.

And then we get to the crowd’s second big mistake, as they misunderstand Jesus’ comment about “not working for the food that perishes” – failing to realise that (when he says that) he’s got in mind the goal they’re working for, and he’s not trying to suggest some novel way of ‘working’. So they ask him: “what must we do to perform the works of God?” (or, probably better-translated, “to do the works God requires?”).

They are assuming that, whatever ‘challenge’ God may set them in terms of acts of piety or other worthy deeds, it’s within their ability to meet them (if they so choose).

But Jesus puts them straight: “the work of God is that you believe in him whom he has sent” (that is, you believe in Jesus). The “food that endures for eternal life” does not come about from works, but from faith – as a free gift from God.

That was a tough one to accept for this crowd – and it can be a tough one to accept for a typical 21st-century westerner. Maybe it just sounds far too good to be true (there must be a catch somewhere – there’s no such thing as a free lunch...). Or maybe we can’t get comfortable with the idea of being given something we haven’t earned, something that isn’t ‘down to us’. But, let’s not miss out – let’s accept the gift!

And then the third way in which the crowd were badly mistaken in their response to the feeding of the 5000 was in their expectations of what that miracle was indicating about the kind of ‘leader’ Jesus was going to be.

They’re obviously very taken with him; they call him ‘Rabbi’ (a term of great honour, literally meaning ‘my great one’). They remember Moses, the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the desert, and how God sent down bread (‘manna from heaven’) when they had no food.

So they want Jesus to prove himself as the new Moses, a greater Moses – to prove his ‘messianic’ status – with ever more dramatic miraculous signs that show how he will redeem God’s people from their Roman oppressors. “What (further) sign are you going to give us” (they ask), “so that that we may see it and believe you?”

But that isn’t what Jesus was about. He was not the ‘political’ messiah they were looking for. In the middle of last week’s passage (verse 15 of chapter 6), the crowd (who’d been miraculously fed) wanted to grab Jesus and force him to be king – which is why he gave them the slip and made his way back to Capernaum (only of course for them to catch up with him again...).

So, if the feeding of the 5000 wasn’t to showcase Jesus as the aspiring leader of a nationalistic movement, or as the way to secure material prosperity, what was it to show? And how does that tie in with Jesus’ insistence that what God is (first and foremost) looking for is belief, is faith?

It’s there in the last verse of our reading – Jesus said to them: “I am the bread of life”. Essential food for life. Staple diet for life. Sustainer of life. Not just a temporary, physical life, but (more pertinently) eternal, spiritual life – life in all its fullness (as Jesus describes it a few chapters further on).

And the two words ‘I am’ at the beginning are much more significant than their normal English usage might imply. Here is the first of seven occasions in John’s Gospel where Jesus uses this expression – and his hearers would have known what he was claiming by it. The words echo those God used to describe himself when meeting Moses at the burning bush – call me ‘Yahweh’, ‘I am who I am’.

For Jesus is revealing that he’s not just a man like us, he’s also fully God. He’s the ‘bread of heaven’, come down from heaven, to give new life to the world – to bring redemption, not from political oppressors but from the scourge of sin, by dying on the cross and rising to life again.

And this new life isn’t something we can buy, that we can earn with our ‘works’, but the free gift of God, available to all who will believe in Jesus and put their trust in him.

Sadly, that wasn’t something the vast majority of this crowd could, or would, do. A short while later, by the end of the chapter, large numbers of them had walked away, grumbling and disappointed. May we not be tempted to do likewise.