

**SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST JEDBURGH PENTECOST 11 SUNG
EUCCHARIST SUNDAY 9TH AUGUST 2015 10.30**

God gives us bread – and everything else that we need

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

John 6:35, 41-51

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.'

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' 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"?' Jesus answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. 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. 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. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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.'

Sermon

I know that the Great British Bake Off is about to start again on the BBC but I would not want you to think that I am obsessed with food, especially after my raspberry pie sermon last week! But we read at the

very beginning of our Gospel reading today: “**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.’**” And so the die is set you will have to listen to another foody sermon, but a message which lies at the very heart of our Christian faith. On Thursday we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord, when we remember the moment that God acknowledged Jesus to be his only Son with these words, “**This is my Son. My Chosen; listen to him!**”

Let’s begin today with a familiar verse from Deuteronomy; it’s not in today’s lectionary readings, but it lies behind this whole series we’ve been hearing from John’s gospel. It also shows up in the temptations stories in Matthew and Luke, and is tied to the reading from First Kings. Moses is giving the Law to Israel, and Moses says to the people that God “humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” We know this verse, especially the punch line, very well. But the more we consider the logic of these words, the more interesting it becomes.

How would you do it? How would you teach someone that we do not live by bread alone? What would you give someone to make them understand this? Our first thought would probably be to give them a sermon, or a lecture, or to try to arrange a spiritual experience. Or maybe to offer a really intellectual adult education class, with professional videos and worksheets and breaking into small groups to go over some discussion questions – maybe that would do it. How about

it? What would you give someone so they could understand that we do not live by bread alone?

What God gave Elijah and the people in the wilderness, and what Jesus gave the crowd in John's gospel, was bread. Manna was bread, or enough like bread to make no real difference. Elijah got ordinary bread. They ate it and it kept them alive. They couldn't live without it. But isn't that peculiar? Why give bread to make people understand that they do not live by bread alone? Of all the things to give, why give the one thing that seems to prove that you can live by bread alone: namely, bread? And yet, this may have been the most important part of the whole business of Israel's being in the wilderness, of their being formed as the people of God. Jesus may have seen this as vitally important to his mission.

Because if the people couldn't get this – if they couldn't figure out what was going on with the manna, or with the miraculous feeding, if they couldn't understand about the loaves – well, then, it was all pretty much hopeless.

The key to all of this is that God gave Israel and Elijah – and Jesus gave that crowd – bread in such a way that it was obvious that the bread was pure gift. They didn't make it, they didn't work for it, they couldn't pay for it – it was just there. So they had the chance to look at bread, at the stuff of life, with clarity; and to see beyond that thing, and to see that this vital stuff was also and centrally a gift from God and so a sign of God's love and of God's call to relationship with them. Since it was so clearly a gift, they were able to see that the thing, the bread, meant more than what it was all by itself. All real gifts do.

But if the manna, if the bread on the hillside, if the stuff that God give us so that we can live, if this is given to us, not just to keep us alive, but also to draw us to God and to life with God, then we do not, and we cannot, live by bread alone. So, oddly, the only gift that can really show us that we do not live by bread alone is free bread. Anything less vital, anything less essential, would allow us to cling to life for its own sake, and so make all questions of meaning secondary and avoidable. This is still going on, and even now God gives us life, and the stuff of life, not because life is the most important thing in the world for us, but just exactly because it is not. We are given these as gifts, to help us realize that God, and life with God, are most important.

We see this with special clarity at the altar, where the bread we receive is clearly not about itself alone; but is linked to something much greater. So we can look with awe and reverence upon something as simple as this thin, tasteless wafer, because we know it to be sign, symbol and presence of something much greater than flour and water.

But the deepest sign, symbol and presence of something much greater is not just this bread; it is everything we have.

Part of the point of this bread, the bread of the Eucharist, is to teach us that we do not live by bread alone. This bread is special so that we can understand that all bread, all that we have, all that is necessary for life, that this, too, is special. It's all given to us as a sign, symbol and occasion of God's love. It's here to draw us past itself and past ourselves, so that we, seeing both the gift and the giver, will respond to the giver in love and in service. Creation, all of creation, is sacramental in this sense.

So it all gets jumbled up. The bread we eat every day, and Israel's manna in the wilderness, and Jesus being the bread of life, and our weekly Eucharist – they all run together.

Here is one way into this. There's an old rabbinic admonition that insists, of anything and everything, "If you don't give thanks for it, it's bad for you." The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the air you breathe, the people and the things of your life, if you don't give thanks for it, it's bad for you.

So, if you have enough to eat, and the strength to go on for another day, and people who care about you, if you have all of that and you don't give thanks for it, then it's bad for you – all of it.

It's poisoning your soul, and shrinking your life. Really.

That's because giving thanks for something puts it in its proper place, it places the thing as part of our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. That's where things, all things, properly belong. Anything, especially bread, is understood properly only when it is understood in relationship to God.

On the other hand, if we do give thanks for it, then it can be good for us. If we give thanks for it, then every part of our lives can draw us toward the only source of meaning and hope that makes any sense.

It's very easy to forget this. It's very easy to value the things of creation and of our lives for themselves, to take them outside the context of a relationship with God. When we do this, when we see only what is right in front of us and no more, then we are impoverished, we are barely living on the surface of our lives and of our world.

That's what it means to live by bread alone. To live by bread alone means to see no farther than the things themselves, and so to miss the presence and the love and the call of God that are really a part of every piece of bread we have. It's to miss the gift, and the love behind the gift.

So God gave Elijah and Israel bread, and Jesus gave the crowds on those mountainsides bread, and God gives us bread – God gives us all we need for life – so that we may be drawn beyond all of these and see more than we would see otherwise, so that we might understand that we do not live by bread alone.

God gives us bread – and everything else that we need, so let us give thanks not only for his provision of our physical needs but also for our spiritual needs. He is indeed Lord of all.