

John 6: 1-21; Ephesians 3: 14-21

August 12<sup>th</sup> 2018

*The true bread from heaven*

I suspect that the story of the feeding of the 5000 is relatively well known, even in a secular age when knowledge of the Bible is abysmal. Mention five loaves and two fishes and there is some chance that people might think of the Bible story we read this morning. And indeed it might even be considered a story for our times, one that is profoundly relevant for our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Just think for a moment about the basic ingredients of this incident.

For a start there is scarcity. There is a very big crowd of very hungry people and food is in very short supply and we know all about that in our contemporary world. Despite our advances in technology we have still not found a way to feed everybody on earth, and desperate stories of famine and drought continue to haunt us. And so a story of a shortage of food on a mountain on Galilee two thousand years ago and too many mouths to feed collides with stories of shortages of food in our modern high speed, high-tech world and still too many mouths to feed. But then, we find, this story gives us hope! Step forward the boy with his five barley loaves and two fishes and suddenly there is food aplenty and all are fed. And in a time when we're a little embarrassed by anything that smacks of the supernatural or of a miracle, the good thing is that there is a simple, non-religious, down to earth moral to this story: it's all about sharing. Someone is willing to share - and suddenly there is enough for everybody. And the story ends with the leftovers filling twelve baskets and again there is a nice little lesson we can learn from that. If only people would learn to share then we would find that actually there is more than enough to go round. The scandal of poverty and want in the world is not actually because of scarcity. It's not a question of shortages. It's a question of justice. It's about the stock-piling of goods and resources by the rich and the powerful and the withholding of them from the poor. And the sooner we learn to share, the sooner we learn the ways of justice, the better.

So this story has relevance for today, even among we moderns who apparently find faith so difficult (or so we are told). The message is simple and secular: learn to share and there will be more than enough! Learn to share and we will solve the problems of world poverty and starvation. Whoopee.

The problem is John will not let us get away with that. It just won't do. And here it has to be said that whoever set this passage for today has not been entirely helpful to us. We need to read on further, and if we had we would have found the crowd who had been fed searching for Jesus because they know that they are onto a good thing. Maybe this whole incident has reminded them of incidents that happened long ago in their history when hungry people were fed with bread. Maybe it has reminded them of long ago when their ancestors were wandering in the desert after their liberation from Egypt and they were hungry and Moses provided food for them, manna from heaven. And now Jesus is the new Moses, the bread-giver, the antidote to scarcity and hunger, and no wonder we are told that the crowd wanted to make him king. The problem is though that Jesus will have none of it. Later in the passage, when the crowd eventually catch up with Jesus, what does he say to them? Well, just listen: 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life...' In other words there is material food, bread which feeds the stomach and there is the food of eternal life that feeds the soul, and this miracle is about the latter. And all this leads to Jesus going on to utter those sublime words, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...' In other words what Jesus is really wanting to give people here is not actually bread at all – he wants to give them himself. The crowd's hunger for bread points to a deeper hunger that Jesus is wanting to satisfy – call it spiritual hunger if you like, call it the hunger of the soul, the hunger for God.

Or turning to our reading from Ephesians this morning, Paul in that great chapter is talking about the riches of God that are offered to us in Christ. And just listen as he prays that the Ephesians may be 'filled with the fullness of God'. What an extraordinary thought, that our hearts and our lives should be filled full with God. That is pretty much what Jesus is saying about the feeding of the 5000 - that we should be filled not with the fullness of bread, but with the fullness of the living God.

But, oh dear – this means that we are back to religion again. We thought we had a nice little story about sharing. We thought we had a nice little moralistic tale about how we might save the world if only we would do as the little boy did. We thought we'd filleted this story and got rid of religion. And suddenly we're back talking about food that endures to eternal life and we're back to God again. And quite frankly, that is what is so annoying about John. Why does he always have to spiritualise everything? Why is he so heavenly

minded? He takes a good perfectly story about human hunger and the need for bread and turns it into something 'religious', about our need of God.

Well, in the next few weeks we are going to be looking at some stories from John's Gospel and we need to get this clear from the start. John has what we might call a 'sacramental' view of the world, and that is one where earthly things point beyond themselves to heavenly, spiritual realities. Our need for bread points to our need for God. And just couple of chapters back Jesus has asked a woman for a cup of water and suddenly Jesus is telling her that everyone who drinks of the water that she gives him will thirst again, but that whoever drinks of the water that he gives will never thirst again. And he's talking about the Holy Spirit of God! And in a couple of weeks we will be looking at a story of Jesus healing a blind man, only it becomes clear that this miracle is not about the condition of this man's retina but the condition of his soul. Again and again John diverts our gaze from earth to heaven. And at this point can't you just hear the indignation of our atheist friends? That's the trouble with religion. It takes our minds off material needs and distracts them with talk of God, and then people become so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use.

Well, maybe. But maybe not. Because I want to argue that in fact what we need today is a good dose of heavenly-mindedness. I want to argue that we need desperately to hear this story of the feeding of the 5000 not as a morality tale about sharing, but as a story that directs our attention away from the bread that fills bellies and onto the bread of life that is the fullness of God.

Let's think of it this way. If the big problem that afflicts vast swathes of humanity is that of poverty and lack of access to the riches of God's earth, the problem that affects the rest of this weary world is a crass consumerism that cannot see beyond the next purchase. The big problem for far too many people is not that they are too heavenly-minded but that they are far too earthly-minded. We buy into the lie that life consists of food and drink and clothes and goods and ever more ferocious consumption. And it is this mentality that is fuelling injustice, and exacerbating global warming, the effects of which all fall disproportionately upon the already poor and disadvantaged. In other words the problems of poverty and hunger and injustice that afflict the 'have nots' of the earth are largely the flip side of the materialism and the obsessive consumerism that afflict 'the haves'. It is because we who have are so earthbound and so materially-minded that we create problems for the have-nots. And it is we who

are the ‘haves’ therefore that need a bit of heavenly-mindedness. It is we ‘haves’ who urgently need to hear Jesus warnings about not working for perishable food but for the food that endures to eternal life. It is we ‘haves’ who need to hear Jesus’ warnings about life consisting of more than food and drink. It is we ‘haves’ that need to hear Paul’s words about true fullness that consists not in stockpiling goods but in the stockpiles of grace and divine love that Paul extols in Ephesians 3. Maybe when we begin to ‘grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love’ we might stop grasping so relentlessly after what rightly belongs to others - and then we might seek justice and plenty for all. The simple fact is that losing our religion, as we are doing in this part of the world, for all that it is celebrated by many, is not making the world one whit fairer and more just – far from it. And we need urgently to rediscover John’s sacramental theology where the things of earth point us towards the things of God and open us up to the realm of the Spirit.

Indeed a dose of John’s Gospel might be welcomed by many. After all, there are signs that we are growing weary with our bland, stale diet of materialism. I think of the many people who say that they are spiritual but not religious. That seems to me to be an acknowledgement that the food of pure secularism fails to satisfy. We have been made for more than this! We have been made for God! And of course the church is concerned about our bodies and about the hungry being fed and about justice. That is all part of the manifesto of God’s kingdom. But we have more to offer. We have Christ who is the bread of life. And when we seek first him and his kingdom then other things fall into place and right prevails.

There is, then, a kind of paradox here. Jesus uses this miracle to tell us there is more to fullness of life than bread. There is also the Bread of Life, the fullness of God. And the sooner we in the bloated, voracious rich countries of the world realise this, the sooner those in the depleted, deprived parts of the world may begin to get their fair share. Amen.

O holy and loving God,  
Maker of all things,  
God of abundance, God of plenty,  
we praise and bless your holy name.  
You have made the universe to teem  
with galaxies of stars and planets and moons;  
you have made the earth to swarm  
with life in all its bewildering variety and diversity;  
everywhere we look we see the grand riches  
of your bounty and creativity.  
And then we look at Jesus and we see  
the overflowing riches and bounty of your grace.  
We worship you.  
And we come to you today in want,  
we come to you in need  
for our lives are sparse and lacking.  
We come to you hungry and empty,  
at the end of our resources  
for we have turned from you,  
the source of life in all its fullness.  
And so we confess our sins to you.

O God, come and fill us again.  
Come in Jesus and feed our hungry souls;  
Come to we who are poor and make us  
rich in grace as we receive your forgiveness  
and strength.  
Come and fill us to overflowing with your love.  
We pray in Jesus name and in his words...

## Prayers of Intercession: 12.08.18

Hymn 231 verse 1, followed by:

Gracious God,

We praise you for your generous, bountiful provision.

We praise you for the extravagance of your creation

and we thank you for scientists

who explore its wonders and mysteries;

and for artists who are inspired by your creativity;

and for all who work in the food industry:

for farmers and for those who produce and process our food

and make it available to us.

And we pray for the welfare and the humane treatment of animals in the meat industry.

For the blessings of your providence we praise and thank you...

*In the just reward of labour...*

Hymn 231: verse 2:

O righteous God,

in the just reward of labour your will is done.

But our world is unjust.

Food and resources are unevenly spread,

some hoard while others lack,

and so we pray for the hungry and despairing.

Show us how we may create a fairer world by the choices we make.

Bless the work of FairTrade and other organisations

that campaign for global justice.

O God, help us we pray so to rejoice in our riches in Christ

that we may live generously and graciously,

and so may others live to enjoy the riches of creation.

*For the harvests of the Spirit...*

Hymn 231: verse 3:

O living God,

in Jesus Christ you give us the Bread of life.  
Bless your church that we may point others to that bread  
so that they might find food for their souls.  
Bless our congregation here at this church  
And help us to encourage one another in our faith.  
Bless our elders and members and guide our decisions;  
and hear us as we pray for those who have had cause to rejoice  
and those who have had cause to mourn in recent days.  
Bring comfort to those who grieve the loss of loved ones  
and help us to grieve with them.

O God, we praise you for the love that has found us,  
and that ever surrounds us,  
and we pray that something of the breadth and length  
and height and depth of that love, revealed in Christ,  
may be glimpsed here.

We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.