

## Sunday 9 August: Ninth Sunday after Trinity

### True Bread

**Readings: Ephesians 4.25-5.2; 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.”

Bread of life... when you live in the centre of London it's difficult to buy really beautiful bread. I mean baker's bread, still warm from the oven. The supermarkets of course sell bread but it never tastes quite as good. The fancy patisseries sell bread but it's over priced and seems dense and heavy and I always find tastes a bit stale. What I want is simple real bread. The loaves I end up buying at Tesco's are already cut for the toaster and in plastic, they can either taste like dust or like sponge, never that springing substance and delicious freshness of real bread. Fresh bread has a smell all of its own. It has an outer crust but an inner-substance and soft moistness, it is risen bread. When I was on holiday last week on the Greek Island of Kefalonia I went to the baker in Fiskardo, which is a village around a harbour in the Ionian sea. On the door of the baker was a hand written message both in Greek and English. Closed, fresh bread baked Morning 7.30 a.m.

The next morning I woke early and walked about half a mile from the place I was staying along the edge of the sea to the bakery. The bakery was open, you could smell it from 50 metres. I entered and behind the counter there was the most beautiful bread, crusty and risen, in wooden racks. Just as I entered, a boy arrived from the kitchen with another tray of hot olive bread. I pointed to one of these loaves and the woman took it in her hands as if it was something precious and beautiful, which it was, and wrapped it in white paper and handed it to me, it was still warm and the crust crunchy to touch. The bread contained these delicious, sliced, salty, torpedo shaped, fresh black olives. I began eating it on the way back to where I was staying, slowly along the beach, tearing off pieces and savouring the taste. It seemed the most delicious bread I had ever eaten. It tasted as bread should taste, of the land, the sun and the sea: it was like you could taste the growing grain, the harvesting, the grinding, the olive groves on the hillside. And I felt that this is how life should be: real bread, simple and delicious with time to touch it, smell it, taste the full flavour, and no need to disguise or preserve the taste with a thousand additives. I know everyone sometimes gets feelings like this on holiday and we all have to get back to the reality of supermarkets and the real world... but wait a moment...this was the real world, this bread, real and simple... you could not get any better. And I thought what are we doing to ourselves? What am I doing to myself? This was reality. As simple as bread. Real bread in which you tasted life. Later in the day I sat on the beach and watched people playing in the sea. No computers, no e-mails, no “game-boys”, no TV, no DVD, no amusement arcades, no confectionary, sauces and burger bars, just a beach and water and the sun and the shade of olive trees. And I watched people set free, interacting so naturally it was like goodness come out of hiding. Whole families grandparents, parents, children so at peace with themselves, with each other and the environment. And I swam and I ate bread and huge ripe tomatoes so full of the miracle of creation and these simple actions were like a prayer.

I know deep down that I want to live this naturally – eat this bread of life even in the midst of the city. And although I am not quite sure how, I know it is possible. Because I have tasted that bread of life in St. Martin's here in the middle of Trafalgar Square. The problem is that the bread of life needs attention, time to rise, the space to realise its fullness. It needs the clutter to be cleared away. In the Vicar's book of the month, “The Shack,” God is a baker.

Several years ago when I was living on Holy Island in Northumberland I was visited by my friend who had two children who sat in the car watching separate DVDs on their own screens with ear phones. I asked them if they would like to explore the island and the sand dunes, they said the island was “boring”. In fact everything for them seemed boring. So I said to the two children “I’ll give you a challenge for the two days you are here, you are not allowed to use the word boring. If you say the word boring I will fine you £1 each time.” Given this initial material incentive they more than stepped up to the challenge.. We walked across the shallow water, a vast mirror of light, like the ancient pilgrims to the island, we climbed the watch towers on the way looking out to the horizon where the sky joined the sea. They ran across the vast wet sand beaches, they went round the whole island, climbed up to the castle, they wrote messages on banks of sand in the sand dunes and watched the sun go down into the sea. And their true characters emerged from the DVD and the boring and they shone with the sea and sand and seemed scrubbed and infused with sun and salty air. Their mother said they said later that Holy Island was “well good” and not at all boring. It was not loads of stuff, it was just simple, as simple as all goodness is, as simple as bread. It’s not that I’m attacking the modern world, it’s just that we have to rediscover those values which have often buried under too much stuff we do, or have, or think we need. So much stuff that we can become overwhelmed by it and live in a kind of virtual reality: no longer receptive to life or to God.

The Jews complained about Jesus when he said that he was the bread of life. How could he say he came down from heaven? He was just the son of Joseph whose parents they know, how could he possibly have delusions of immortality. Jesus answers them that if only they did not dismiss him, they could realise that within this seemingly ordinary, local man – the way to God. The one who has come down to lift them up. Don’t dismiss this Jesus Christ, don’t just think this is some irrelevant Galilean making weird claims. No within this life, within the simplicity there is all the beauty and wonder of the divine: the expression of God. When we open eyes to Christ in his radical simplicity we are also opening our eyes to God and we will “be taught by God.” Jesus said to them “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 it and not die. I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.” Christ uses this symbol of bread to point us towards the deepest hunger of our lives, a hunger which can never be answered by greed, or accumulation, or stuffing ourselves, or fasting: it is a hunger only answered by God’s love. We are offered by Christ a living bread, a bread of eternity.

At Worth Abbey, Abbot Christopher Jamison spoke of three symptoms of our modern lives which are the result of our hunger. First he talked about anger, not a righteous anger for justice, but an anger which arises when the needs of our own lives and ego are not being met. An anger of the modern city, where we are in perpetual conflict with the day or with the stress or anxieties of our lives. And where the lives of others interfere with, frustrate us, attack or undermine our plans. Where life become a constant struggle against stresses- opposition at work or in the home. An anger where we feel that everything is against us. We become like a wound spring. In its extreme it leads to road rage, to acts of meaningless violence, to broken relationships, to binge drinking, to the need to escape. It is an anger which encourages a culture of blame. Find the one who is guilty so I can throw stones to release my own inner hostility. This anger the desert Fathers saw as a deadly poison which must be uprooted. The anger of the Israelites in the desert turned to idolatry, conflict and greed in which they could no longer recognize the love or the gifts of God.

The Abbot spoke of another symptom of modern life and that he said was sadness. A sense of deep despair which many carry with them that somehow they have missed out, that life is not fair, that they cannot ever find peace. And this is often compounded by a deep sense of guilt that somehow we are to blame and our failings will always bring us down. This sadness is also a deep inner hunger. And leaves us so often full of longing and fear.

The third symptom he talked about is what he called acedia. Acedia is spiritual apathy: the cynicism which undermines our faith and fills us with doubt. It tells us religion is a waste of time, and prayer and God are irrelevant and we would do better to just forget it. Acedia has so come to dominate our society that people who still hold onto their faith are often ashamed to acknowledge that they believe. These three forces of opposition to God's love are very much in evidence at this time. Many of those who enter this church carry with them a mixture of those three struggles.

Yet the conflict is also the means by which we discover again the truth. It's only after we've eaten the plastic covered imitation that we discover again the full taste of real bread. How can we be truly fed unless we discover the one who can satisfy our very deepest longings? At this Eucharist today you will be offered the bread of life. It is not the dispensing of some magic remedy for life's problems. It is in fact the most precious gift anyone can ever be offered. It is the life of God in you, offered to you without cost or reservation. This bread is a sign of Christ's complete and unconditional love for you. It is a sign that his life will be broken to show you that love. It is a sign of the life of God which is the beginning of eternity. Often we are blind to it. But this Eucharist is a stripping away of all that is false and in its place offering you the reality of your God given life. Life, vulnerable, precious and touched, real-life a fragile gift which needs God in the nurturing. Like that bread I tasted in Kefalonia we have to give Christ time and space to know the fullness of all that he offers. The bread of God's love can connect us to the eternal treasures of our lives. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Taste and see the Lord is very good.

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