

Sermon on Sunday 1 August 2021

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

The bread of life

Bread. I've been thinking about bread quite a lot recently. Partly because I've decided that Jenny and I have been eating too much bread (we make our own, nice Italian herb bread and olive bread and sundried tomato bread) and it's contributed to some of our extra Lockdown pounds.

And I've been thinking about bread partly because we were down in Portsmouth last week and visited the Mary Rose, Henry VIII's warship that sank in the Solent in 1545. If you've never been there, it is a very compelling exhibition and you get a real sense of what it was like to live during Tudor times.

History is an evolution, of course, and Tudor England was emerging from the middle ages. Progress was being made in lots of areas of life - science, literature, architecture, fashion and philosophy - but the way of life was still very harsh for ordinary people. Food for most people at the time was basic and, because

England was fertile and wheat was grown, bread was the staple diet, as it has been for other civilisations around the world for thousands of years.

As Paul Attridge noted in one of his excellent Thoughts for the Day a couple of weeks ago (thank you, Paul), food and drink feature quite a lot in the Bible. It's not surprising, really, because people in Palestine in those days lived very close to the edge of survival; some people didn't know where their next meal was coming from and the occurrence of famine regularly appears in the Old Testament.

So bread, the food that perishes, was important to people. And Jesus knew this. He had just returned from a hillside where he had fed 5,000 people with two loaves (and five little fishes). He knew that talking about bread was going to stir the crowd's interest.

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

But what did he mean when he talked about the bread of life?

As some of you know, before I came to live in Hertford, I was a professional business

journalist. The last magazine that I worked on covered the catering and hospitality industry. I was the Editor and I was fortunate to eat in some of the most famous restaurants in the country. I was friends with some of the top chefs of the day and I learnt a lot about the preparation of good food.

But I came to realise that the secret to a good meal was not just the perishable food on the plate. It was about the service, the ambience and friendliness of the restaurant but, more than anything, it was about the welcome you received and company you were with.

You can go into the poshest restaurant in town, with comfy chairs and chintz curtains and clean white table cloths, but it's only when the maître de greets you at the door and says 'Hello, how nice to see you again (even if he's never met you before), you're very welcome, I have the perfect table for you and your guests, follow me'... it doesn't matter what the restaurant looks like or what the food or wine tastes like, it's that welcoming moment that makes you know that you're going to go back to that restaurant. It's like coming to believe in the risen Christ. Once you've entered his

kingdom, you know that you will always keep coming back.

And it's the same with the bread of life, the spiritual bread that Jesus was talking about. It's not the taste or even the ingredients of the bread that's most important, it's who you share it with that is the key to enjoying it.

In other words, the bread of life is about being part of a Christian community. It's about being surrounded by faithful, steadfast, gifted people giving generously to their communities of their time and talents and treasure. It's about prayerfulness and moments of renewal and resourcefulness and love of God and love of neighbour. That is the real bread of life. That was what Jesus was talking about. And the best thing about it is that it doesn't perish, it will be here tomorrow and the next day, for eternity.

I will leave you with a story.

After the Second World War, there were many homeless children in Europe being cared for by charities and orphanages. They were well looked after but, despite the security of shelter and warm clothes, after what they had been through, particularly the hunger that they had experienced at the end

of the war, they had trouble sleeping at night. Then a psychologist came up with the idea of sending these children to bed with a piece of bread. He explained that after the destructive trauma that these children had experienced, they were inclined to worry about tomorrow. If they could be assured there was still food left for the next day, they would have peace enough to let slumber come. And it worked.

With the bread of life, we should feel the same, secure and confident about tomorrow.

Lord, give us this day, our daily bread. Let us be confident that the real bread of life, the community of Christianity that is sustained by that bread, will not perish. Amen.

