

Online sermon on Sunday 8 August 2021

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Gospel: John 6. 35, 41-51

John 6 – Bread of Life: a second helping

St John's discourse on the Bread of Life fills some 70 verses, that's nearly one tenth of the whole Gospel. The guardians of our weekly lectionary encourage us to spend four weeks looking at it.



It begins with the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, and from this tale of five humble barley loaves, John builds up layer upon layer of teaching – or perhaps I should say slice upon slice – until we end at the mystery of the Eucharist.

"I am the Bread of Life"

One of the privileges of a well-travelled life is that you encounter how many different shades of meaning this metaphor can have. Almost every culture on earth has its own distinctive ways of baking and using bread.

My bread parable today comes from a visit to the native American Navajo people, who live in the desert landscapes of northern Arizona. Like many native American tribes, they live their lives in the tension - sometimes fruitful, sometimes stressful - between their ancient traditions and heritage, and the culture of modern America.



In illustration of this, our favourite Navajo diner, at Gouldings in Monument Valley, also offers the more familiar staples of American catering alongside Navajo favourites.

The centrepiece of Navajo cuisine is bread. Fry bread. It's a flat, crispy bread made from cornmeal and sour milk, and fried in oil. It's served in huge, plate-sized portions and it has a flavour similar to unsweetened



donuts. You may order a bowl of green chili stew or of spicy pinto beans to go with it, but these are side dishes; the bread is what it's about.

And when you've finished the savoury side, the waiter will bring you a jug of honey to drizzle over the bread you've still got left over. Your fry bread is your main course, and it's your desert! And it's not just a treat for tourists. The Navajo people have supermarkets and convenience stores in their townships like anywhere else in America, but baking their own bread, fresh for each meal, is one of many traditions they cling to passionately.



Our son Tom was not so taken with Navajo cooking, and he stuck to his staple vacation diet, a bacon cheeseburger. I'm not knocking that, a hamburger in the US is miles better than the pap we get served in

fast food chains over here. In the menus, they list them under sandwiches. It's a funny idea of a sandwich; a big slab of ground beef (sometimes two), and a vast pile of cheese, bacon, salad and pickles, with a little round white bread roll on top, often with a cocktail stick stuck through it to hold it all together. Yes, it's bread, out of a plastic bag and recently defrosted, but you know it isn't meant to contribute anything to the flavour, or nutrition of your meal. It's just to stop you getting your fingers greasy whilst you munch your way through the fillings!

That's America. But we're a long way from bread as Jesus knew it as well. Who still bakes their own bread? I remember my mum did when I was a child; the weekly labour of mixing and kneading, of patient waiting for the dough to rise, and the oven to heat up. But for most people it's something you buy with your weekly shop at the supermarket, usually sliced and in a plastic bag from a factory in Bolton. And kept in the freezer 'till it's needed.

It's something to keep the filling of our sandwiches in place. Or something to nibble at a restaurant table whilst we're waiting for the proper food to arrive.

There's nothing wrong with that, but it's not what Jesus meant by 'The Bread of Life'.

It is terribly easy to let our experience of religion go the same way as our bread. Something you go out for once a week, neatly prepared and packed for you by



someone else. Or maybe something you keep in the freezer, a back-up, until you happen to need it in an unexpected emergency. Or something to nibble at from time to time, when there's nothing more interesting on the table of our lives. Or, even worse, something to keep our hands clean, to keep the grease of life off our fingers – a thin layer of comfort for troubled consciences as we munch through our portion of a world full of indifference, greed and inequality.



We should not be surprised if that kind of religion leaves our souls unsatisfied and does not appeal to the world outside.

"I am the Bread of Life." Jesus does not offer himself as a

starter, or as a side dish in our lives. He offers himself as the main course. He is telling us that he belongs right at the heart of our daily routines of life; that we can trust in him for our most basic needs, both material and spiritual.

A bread that promises eternal life. And remember that word 'eternal' means to much more than 'everlasting'. He promises fulness of life, satisfying life, life where we look forward with delight to the richness that each tomorrow brings.

Jesus offers himself as the staple food to nourish us in body and soul; in prayer, in praise, in simple humble acknowledgment that He is Lord, in all that we do, at home, at work, at play, at our table.

And maybe not just our staple food. I think back to my fry bread at Monument Valley, and the drizzle of honey. Your entrée and your desert all in one. Jesus, our starter, our main course, and the desert – something for our primary needs and for the special treats as well. If I have learned one thing about Jesus in my life, it's that he gives us far more treats than we deserve. Yes, Jesus is my daily bread – but there's usually room for a taste of honey, as well.

How did our Psalm go? 'Oh taste and see that the Lord is gracious....'

Amen

