

Reflection on Sunday 4 August 2024

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Reading: John 6 24-35

Do not work for the food that perishes

As many of you will know, we had a house in France for almost 30 years. It was in the department of Morbihan near the southern Brittany coast and the easiest way to get there was to take the Brittany Ferries overnight sailing from Portsmouth to St Malo.

The boat sailed at 8.15pm and one of the delights was the main restaurant where the starter took the form of a huge self-service buffet with endless supplies of king prawns and langoustines and the dessert was a self-service mass of the best of French patisserie. It became one of the highlights of the journey and as we completed our 328th crossing last month we have consumed a lot of prawns and langoustines!

One of the most interesting aspects of this gastronomic experience was watching how other people reacted to this freedom – almost everyone piled their plates high with all manner of food, almost none of which, to quote Marcus Waring, belonged on the same plate! Last month I watched in amusement as a small boy, left to his own devices, selected a chocolate brownie, a slice of chocolate gateaux, a handful of nachos and a bread roll as his starter!

And that was the appeal of the restaurant – there was a limitless supply of good things so that you'd never leave hungry. Anything troubling you just disappeared: no cooking, no

washing up, no thought of tomorrow; you just enjoyed being present in that glorious moment of total satisfaction.

The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd that we've just read has a lot in common with his earlier conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. In both encounters, the first instinct is the desire for physical food and drink; Jesus then uses that desire to point them beyond this physical need to sustenance that is eternal (true bread/living water), and therefore finally to Himself as the true source of that nourishment.

Unfortunately, most of the people following Jesus through Galilee failed to make the connection. Just prior to this encounter, with only five loaves of bread and a couple of small fish, Jesus had fed a crowd of over 5,000 people and had 12 baskets of leftovers. In a time and culture in which many people lived a hand-to-mouth existence, to the crowd, the miracle of this feeding meant providence, stability, and a limitless supply of food to satisfy their daily hunger.

In fact, John tells us that the people were so excited at this prospect; they intended to drag Jesus to Jerusalem and make Him king by force, so they could enjoy this giver of free bread and all he could do for them. But they missed the point. Jesus didn't come to bring bread. He came to be bread.

John got it right in the prologue to his gospel when he said, 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it'. The feeding of the 5,000 wasn't primarily about food or even sharing – it was about a God who provides, a God who makes promises and keeps them. Jesus used that physical reality of food to draw their minds away from the temporary and

perishable and put their focus on the eternal and imperishable, but sadly they missed the point.

But we mustn't be too hard on those people for missing the point. We also hear that same promise of Jesus, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." But do we really understand it?

This food results in eternal life and Jesus promises to just give it to us, but like those people following Jesus, how often do we focus on all the things we'd like to have now to make our lives more comfortable instead?

So, we effectively shut the Bread of Life in the breadbin in order to satisfy ourselves with something that looks a little more appetising right now. We pour all of our time, energy, and effort into our careers, our houses, our pensions, our futures as if our mass of earthly stuff could eventually get so big that it will yield some spiritual benefit... That's why Jesus said, "Do not work for food that spoils..."

Now, working for food that spoils doesn't sound good. It didn't sound good to those people listening to Jesus, so they asked the obvious question, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Unfortunately, it's a natural question to ask because, sadly, our natural instinct is always to try and bargain with God. I must have to do something to get that eternal blessing so I'll do my part, and God will do His, right?

But again, they missed the most important part of what Jesus meant when He said. "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." This isn't about you, or what you do, it's about God and

what He does, and what God does is to offer you eternal life... for free! You simply have to, in faith, believe and receive.

In this famous "I am the Bread of Life" speech, Jesus turns the focus away from physical bread that satisfies hunger for a time and points us to the true, life-giving bread that brings eternal joy – himself. He is the Bread of Life that satisfies every one of our needs in this life and the next.

But the people following him weren't interested in that, they wanted to see another miraculous sign, so once again, betraying their misunderstanding, they ask, "You know, our ancestors ate manna in the desert. Moses fed our forefathers for forty years! What sign will you provide?", apparently trying to goad him into giving them more food. But Jesus knows their hearts and bluntly challenges their motives telling them that they were only following Him, not because they saw His miraculous signs, but because they ate free loaves and the fish until they were full.

Jesus challenges their stubborn human capacity for only seeing what was immediately in front of their noses. Jesus wanted them to put their faith in Him completely, but the crowd wanted to stick with the security of Moses, free food for life. He wanted the crowd to come to Him and to be satisfied in the long term, not just in the moment, but they were not ready to put their trust in Him as their Messiah, as later events demonstrated.

So, for us, the point of this encounter is that faith is ultimately all that matters. Our physical needs, our pains, our hunger, our despair, our loss, all need to be addressed because they matter to us and to God, but they will be met through faith. And they will be met through faith because, as James tells us, faith and works go hand in hand. In other words, our faith should motivate us to reach out and meet people's immediate needs.

In a moment we're going to pray for Ashley as she leaves us to develop her work amongst abused and trafficked women. James goes on to say that pure faith is to "look after widows and orphans in their distress", so reaching out to the most vulnerable and marginalised to try and meet their needs is pure faith in action.

However, Jesus adds another dimension to this by telling us that bread alone will not satisfy because it does not last. What He wants us to see is that, sharing our faith, sharing the reason for our motivation to meet someone's earthly needs, has the chance to meet people's eternal needs.

The Apostle Peter said (in the words of The Message) that we must, "...be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy..." In other words, we have to earn the right to be heard by living in a way that provokes questions. We have to let them ask, not try and ram our faith down their throats. And in an age where selfishness and the cult of Me has never been more prevalent, freely meeting people's physical needs is often so unusual that they will ask.

So, if we remember nothing else from today, I hope that each of us, myself included, would remember Jesus' command to work for the food that He freely offers, the food that endures to eternal life, the food that blesses others. That is the food that Jesus wishes us to share so that no one goes hungry in this life or the one to come.

John 6 24-35

Once the crowd realised that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

This is the Gospel of the Lord