

John 6:35, 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.

John 41-51 At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” <sup>42</sup> They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?”

<sup>43</sup> “Stop grumbling among yourselves,” Jesus answered. <sup>44</sup> “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’<sup>[a]</sup> Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. <sup>46</sup> No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. <sup>50</sup> But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

### Jesus the bread of life

As well as many of Jesus’s most profound statements, John’s gospel also includes more of the moments of tension and controversy than the other gospels. John is willing to get into the niggly-y, difficult stuff, in which Jesus faces those who fail to understand him, sometimes wilfully, and who are unwilling to open their thoughts wide enough to listen to Jesus’s testimony. This passage in John 6 contains both — Jesus’s profound declaration that he is the bread of life, and also the misunderstanding and controversy that surrounded such a statement.

Our readings, stretching across several weeks now have taken us through this extended passage. Firstly, Jesus teaches thousands of people, and having pity on them, he provides food for them, making an abundance out of a boy’s packed lunch. The crowd quickly recognised that this was a miraculous provision, and recognised that he might be ‘the Prophet’, the one whom Moses spoke of, who was supposed to be accompanied by a miracle of the provision of manna. So Jesus sneaked away. He did not want to be made king by force, as they were going to do. He crosses the lake, walking on water in the process, but he is caught up with again, by some who just want more bread, and by some who comes with significant skepticism. To them, he says the bread is not important, *I* am more important. The bread satisfies you for a day, but I satisfy for all eternity. ‘I am the bread of life’.

At this, ‘the Jews’ — John’s catchall for anyone who seems to have a problem with Jesus — deliberately misunderstand him. It is clear that he is speaking in metaphors, but, struggling to handle him, they get awkward. ‘You are the bread come down from heaven? Don’t be ridiculous! You’re Joseph’s son! We know just where you’re from!’

They don’t, of course. *We* know that he was not Joseph’s son. They also believe he is from Nazareth. But *we* know he was born in Bethlehem and — fun fact — Bethlehem mean house (Beth) of bread (lechem). There is nowhere more appropriate for the bread of life to be born!

Now, this feels like an important moment for an aside. This crowd were ok with being given free bread, but were not ready to believe Jesus’s weighty claims, or even consider them. I’d like to compare this to some of our modern excuses for not taking our faith seriously. One of these is ‘I believe in science.’ This argument is most notably used by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins says, ‘there’s no need to believe in God, science can explain everything.’

And we say, 'yes, science explains a lot, but it doesn't explain feeding the five thousand, or the resurrection, or the healing of the woman I know who was born with cerebral palsy, an incurable disorder.'

To which Dawkins would reply — 'that didn't happen, it can't have happened, because science.'

And we say, 'yes, but science can only describe the natural world — things that can be observed repeatedly, in a lab or through a telescope or such like. *We're* talking about the supernatural, things that are *beyond* natural. They happen only on special occasions, according to God's will...'

And Dawkins says, 'but that's impossible, because we don't need God to explain things.'

And we say — 'hang on, you weren't listening to the supernatural bit?' And so it goes.

The problem is, in the end, that 'I believe in science' people *so* don't want to believe in God, that they will try to insist that science can disprove God, when science can't even prove that there isn't a quiet, invisible elephant somewhere in this church!

And that's the attitude of 'the Jews' in John's gospel when they're talking to Jesus. You can't be all you claim to be — we know your dad!

Once we have cut through all the indignation of the crowds, we come back to what Jesus actually says — 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' We have seen that this is literally true through the feeding of the five thousand, but, as we know and understand, hunger and thirst are metaphors for the human need to know God, and knowing God is the present experience of eternal life.

Speaking of which Ecclesiastes 3:11 says "He (God) has set eternity in the human heart..."

And St Augustine says, "You move us to delight in praising you, for you have formed us for yourself; and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." That's a way of saying the same thing — we hunger for what only God can satisfy.

And Goethe says: "all that is transitory is only a symbol." Bread doesn't stay fresh for long, but it points to the one who always satisfies. Indeed, *everything* ultimately points to God, because nothing lasts for ever — except God.

We *do* hunger for eternity, but not just any eternity. We hunger for a good eternity. An eternity of love, goodness, peace and significance. We hunger for the world to be made right — for ourselves and for our family and friends. But when we reflect on that, we find that it is not ok for the world to be ok just for our closest family and friends. We want this for *their* family and friends, and their family and friends and so on. We yearn for God's rule — when peace and justice and the love of God can so rule all people that all people are then liberated to be the fullness of their selves under God.

But Jesus doesn't say 'love is the bread of life.' He is even more specific. He says that *he* is the bread of life. He feeds us, he sustains us, but more, he sustains our souls and fulfils them.

We respond to our physical hunger several times a day. You feel hungry, and you eat. But more than that, you have a pattern of eating breakfast, lunch and tea, and planning for this, so that you probably often eat when you're not even hungry — because you know that you will be if you don't eat now.

Spiritual hunger — soul hunger — is more subtle. It is easily ignored. It is possible to push it aside. One day we have a moment of reflection and discover that we feel spiritually weak, God feels far off, we feel empty. This is easily done. Other faiths demand a discipline of prayer

— five times a day or whatever. Christianity doesn't make that demand. Jesus instead invites a level of maturity from us — work out your own prayer life, work out how you will get your daily bread on a spiritual level.

Just as we need a balance of protein, fat and carbohydrates, we need a balance of reading the Bible to feed us with God's word, and spending time in prayer and quietness to connect with God and share our hearts with God's heart; and acting out that faith — being deliberate in doing good.

This isn't a guilt trip, or it's not supposed to be. This is intended to be encouragement. Come to the bread of life — he will tell you what you need. Time with Jesus will turn into an urgency to read his word and to do his will. As we align with Jesus in this way, in trust, I think we will discover more fully the truth of Jesus being the bread of life, in ways my words could never explain.

Amen.

SDG.