

SERMON

Staple foods. We're so rich that we've almost forgotten how important staple foods are. Staple foods vary from one part of the world to another depending on climate, terrain and endemic species.

Wheat and rye were the main staple foods of the Middle east and so bread was the food that people ate every day. It was bread of rye, the food of the poorer people, which was the bread used along with fish to feed the 5,000. These days in developed countries we don't rely on staple foods for survival, but in New Testament times, the people, especially the poorer people were very much reliant on them. If the harvest failed there would be famine. Remember the famine in Ireland in the 19th century when the potatoes failed due to disease.

When Jesus said that he was the bread of life, he was likening himself to the food that kept people alive. Jesus was saying that he was basic to living a full life but Jesus and the crowd listening to him were on different wave lengths. Jesus was talking on a theological level and the crowd were thinking in literal, physical level. Jesus spoke of bread and they thought of the food made from flour and water and yeast. Jesus spoke of himself as having come down from heaven. The crowd looked at the man they had known as a child whose parents they knew. How could such a person be from heaven? Why was he saying such things?

People who think always in concrete terms are unable to understand abstract thought or metaphors.

In John's gospel we need to be able to understand on a number of different levels. It is like reading poetry or looking at great paintings. There is layer on layer. We have to read and re-read. We can read what other people have had to say about it. Each time we study the gospel we can find new understandings. That is true of many things worth detailed study.

About 10 days ago, there was a program on the ABC about the fossil of a 47million year old primate. It is the most complete early primate fossil ever found. A team of scientists from various countries have studied it in the vault of a museum in Oslo. Even after two years, the scientists were able to make more discoveries. It was fascinating! We know that detailed research of this sort takes a long time.

It is the same with the bible. It takes much study and reading. You think that you know some of the stories almost by heart and then another reading can throw a new light on a passage.

The crowd that misinterpreted Jesus had a difficult time. They started from the wrong spot because they looked at Jesus and saw the local boy they'd known all their lives. It probably needed outsiders with no preconceptions of Jesus to listen carefully to what he said and to really start to understand.

In this passage we have many allusions. There are obvious references to the eucharist. Then there are references to the Old Testament, to books such as Jeremiah and Exodus. There are references to the way God writes his law onto people's hearts. There is the contrast between the bread of life and the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. The crowd had earlier referred to the manna in the desert and Jesus points out that the manna

did not save the Israelites from death. Then Jesus went on to say that those who eat the bread which truly comes from heaven do not die. Clearly Jesus was not talking literally. Christians die. Jesus died before he rose again. He was talking of a different sort of life – of eternal life.

Eternal life is not just life after death. Eternal life is about the quality of life more than quantity. And eternal life begins when we accept Jesus as the Son of God and start to follow his way. Jesus' way is the life of the world to come and the way of the best of life now. The Kingdom is God's promised way of life and it starts now among us here when we start to live according to the way Jesus taught. Jesus is the bread of eternal life. Jesus gives the water that never leaves one thirsty again. Jesus is the staple food of eternal life.

People have to be humble enough to recognise God's unique revelation in and to Jesus and then they can taste the bread of heaven. The Uniting Church theologian, William Loader, says that the theme throughout John's gospel is that Jesus the Son offers this eternal life to all who believe the offer and take it. Eternal life is John's favourite way of describing salvation and it means sharing in God's life, for its benefits both for oneself and for others.

If we think of eternal life as a time line stretching out into infinity, it can look rather dismal – a narrow outlook on life like the old images of sitting on a cloud singing hymns day after day, year after year.

But if we think of eternal life as broad and deep at every point along the way we start to think of a life which embraces all of God's creation. We're not talking here of the sort of broad path that John Bunyan in his book the Pilgrim's Progress, wrote of as the way to hell. This is a breadth of life that is rich in Christian ways. Eternal life is a life which we can enjoy now. A life in which we can enter fully into the joys and sorrows of the world. Yes, the sorrows are there in full measure because we open our hearts to other people. We gain insights into their hopes and fears, their tragedies. Like Jesus, we can weep with them and for them. We are moved to work for justice not because we know we should but because we recognised others as children of God. We no longer think in terms of 'the other', to be feared or despised. All people are deserving of justice and care. Care for an environment is naturally part of a broad Christian life. Love of beauty is integral to a broad Christian life.

A life spent being concerned about one's place in society, about keeping up appearances, about forwarding one's career no matter what and without giving time to others is a narrow life. A hedonistic life spent wasting one's money and future on enjoying the present for oneself is a narrow life. But a life spent enjoying companionship with others for their own sake, enjoying God's creation and taking up responsibility for ensuring that others can also enjoy a full and spiritually enriching life – that life has the breadth of eternal life.

Most of us will at times have felt a strong yearning or hunger for something that we can't name. A yearning for something richer and deeper in life. Think of the message Jesus brought. Jesus is the spiritual bread of life. By being open to him, by inviting Jesus into our hearts, that is how that hunger or yearning can be satisfied.

Many try to fill that emptiness with activity. We turn to the secular world and its ways of filling life. Our lives can be so full of work and family, sport and other activities, even good works, that we can hide that emptiness for years. Then it hits us at middle age or even in

retirement. What is our life worth? Has what we've been doing really mattered? Are we going to leave a better world as a result of our activity?

But we are all here in church this morning. For some it is something we do because we have committed ourselves to follow Jesus. For some it is because of a feeling that maybe, just maybe, there is something in this Jesus. Well, this morning we've read how Jesus said that he was the bread of life. So feed on his message. Then you will gain an approach to life that is quite different to the secular. Your whole outlook on life will change. Things that once seemed important become irrelevant. Things and people you once dismissed as not worth your attention become central to your concerns. It is not a matter of following rules, we know that Jesus tried to get the disciples away from dependence on rules. There would be too many rules to remember. What happens is that with the change in outlook, our way of thinking changes so that we are no longer interested in selfish things, in a hedonistic lifestyle and so our actions change in line with that. That is what opening your life to Jesus can do. We develop a new relationship with Jesus Christ.

To live that life we need to be sustained by Jesus. We need to read the gospels and the letters to the early church. Jesus is the bread of life. It is by feeding on his message that we can have eternal life.

Amen.