

Pentecost 10 – Wesley & St Aidan's – 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2015

Theme: 'Jesus says, "I am the bread of life"'

Reading: John 6: 24-35

Text: Then Jesus declared, "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."

John 6:35

Introduction

In the missionary period in nineteenth century China, there was a name for those people who came to church simply because the church offered food in a time of hardship and famine. Many at this time converted, were baptized, joined the church and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. However, once their prospects improved and they and their families no longer needed rice, they drifted away from the church. Hence the missionaries called them 'rice Christians'. Probably not the best of terms, but it raises the question both from the John 6 passage set as our Lectionary Gospel today as well as for ourselves, 'Why do we continue to follow Jesus?'

The Gospel – John 6:24-35

Notice that John 6:24-35 begins with a situation in which Jesus reportedly is not where a lot of people, who are said to be looking for him, expect him to be. The setting is close to the Festival of the Passover so John 6:4 tells us. There is a large crowd following Jesus and his disciples and the preceding verses from last Sunday's Gospel recount Jesus' feeding of about 5,000 people. This event is the context into which Jesus speaks his words.

Also we need to note the words of John 6:11

"Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted."

Hence here in this account of the 5,000 being fed by Jesus there is a sense that they were both filled and fulfilled or satisfied in their hunger by what they ate. Parallels in the three other Gospels also emphasize this point in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:32-44 and Luke 9:10-17. The literal, ordinary sense of 'filling up' and 'being full' thus takes on an extraordinary depth of further significance that has been remarked upon throughout Christian history. Augustine for example, described the significance of the things recounted in John 6 as *'in magno sacramento'* or 'a grand symbolism'.

Yet it is precisely this extraordinary added significance, not to be mistaken for an immaterial spiritualization, that is reportedly missed by the crowd's demands on Jesus. Having first attempted to make him their 'king' according to preconceived notions in John 6:15 they now question why Jesus and his disciples are no longer around where and when they want to find them.

"Rabbi, when did you come here?" is the first thing we are told that they say to Jesus upon discovering that he has subsequently gone to Capernaum. By this hint of reproach the passage discloses a total lack of awareness on the crowd's part of what has just been happening. That is, the terror the disciples have just been through in the storm as they journeyed to Capernaum and Jesus coming to them 'stilling the waves' in John 6:16-21.

The response of Jesus to those who demand to know his whereabouts is to probe instead what they are really seeking. Are they after him to have their 'fill of loaves' but not the fulfilment of their lives?

Chrysostom, the preacher from ancient times thought so and wrote: "By Jesus' words to them He was all but saying this,

‘It is not the miracle of the loaves that has struck you with wonder, but the being ‘filled.’”

Having their purposes thus challenged, those questioned in turn ask to know from Jesus what works they must perform and in turn ask him what sign he will give to them as a miracle.

Not surprisingly the crowd frame their inquiries in terms of what is already familiar to them of Moses in times past.

“Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written:

‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” John 6:31

In Jesus’ reply we hear a striking shift in tense from the past to the present. It is not who ‘gave’ in the sense of whose earthly giving of manna from heaven happened in the past, but who now ‘gives’ the bread that is coming down from heaven and granting life to the world. Suddenly it is God at work here and now as Jesus says:

“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.” John 6: 35

The last words from the crowd, as recorded here, sound remarkably expectant and considerate, almost approaching a prayer and quite different in attitude to their earlier words:

“Sir, from now on give us this bread.” John 6:34

This is a complex passage so how do we deal with this it today?

Let me make three points.

1. Firstly, are we like the ‘rice Christians’ in China that came to Christ to be ‘filled’ with a food that doesn’t last and so they/we fade with no ‘fulfilment’ or ongoing sustenance offered? Do we in fact see and accept the spiritual consequences of Jesus as ‘The bread of life’ that continually fulfils us? Challenging faith questions from Jesus’ time that are still applicable today. The duality of levels of interpretation of the feeding of the 5,000 come to us afresh in this reading today and confront us in a few moments time as we share in the Eucharist or Holy Communion.
2. Do we still think that we can bargain with God like the crowd who said if we do these certain things that God requires then will you give us a miracle? It is still a modern day attribute instead of simply accepting by faith, that Jesus is the Christ, the promised one of God. We want to bargain, we love to bargain but in our faith there is no bargaining – only faithfulness.
3. Thirdly, this passage teaches us to live in the present and not the past. God is currently at work. God through Christ is offering hope even in apparent difficult circumstances and we are called to remember that each day.

As we come to communion and take the bread and drink the wine use this time as a prayer time, reflecting and praying for the people and things dear to you. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” – may we take hope and solace from this “I am” saying of our Lord.

Amen.