

## EUCHARIST ADDRESS, 5 August 2018

**Deuteronomy 8: 1 – 20**

**John 6:24 – 35**

May the words of my mouth,  
And the thoughts of all our hearts,  
Be now and always acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

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Has anyone here this morning ever been hungry?

It's a rhetorical question, so I'm going to answer it on your behalf. No...of course you haven't! I mean...*not really*. And nor have I.

I'm not talking about the light-headed feeling you get by mid-afternoon when you've been busy at work and had to skip lunch...or the rumbling in your stomach when you've overslept and had to dash out of the house without breakfast.

I'm talking about real *hunger*, the kind that grips your body with such a need for food that your mind can't think about anything else.....the kind which makes getting something to eat a matter of urgent physical necessity.

It's likely that none of us here have experienced, or ever will, real hunger of this kind at any point in our lives.

But the people speaking with Jesus in the reading from John's gospel that we've just heard...those people would have known exactly what hunger meant.

If you lived in a mainly rural society in Palestine in the First Century, you were only one year's bad harvest away from experiencing hunger, two bad harvests from the threat of actual starvation. Everyone would have known this.

What's more, hunger for them wasn't just a real possibility, but an ever-present historical memory. The hunger of the People of Israel as they wandered in the desert for 40 years, and the story of how God saved them from it, was a foundational fact of their existence both as a Jewish nation and as a community of faith.

And if all of this seems impossibly distant from us, we might remember that the same type of hunger was prevalent in this country until much less than 200 years ago...and that even now, in less than a day's journey, we could find ourselves in a place where it still is today.

By any historical standards, the people listening to Jesus lived entirely normal lives, and we are the ones who don't.

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So why begin with all this talk about hunger?

For this reason: because if you live in a world in which hunger is part of your personal experience...if not a reality today then either a memory of yesterday or a fear of what tomorrow will bring...if you live in that world, then *bread* – *bread* which is nutritious and filling, *bread* which is a source of high energy, *bread* made each new day from grain that you can store, so that it comes to you fresh all year round, even in the middle of winter – this *bread* is the stuff of life.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray '*Give us this day our daily bread*', he doesn't mean it as a metaphor...he's referring to the one essential life-giving food they had.

In the world in which Jesus lived, to have bread...*or not to have it*...was the difference between being hungry *or not*, suffering starvation *or not*, living *or not*. Bread was literally a matter of life and death.

In this month of August, we're exploring in our Sunday morning services the teaching from John Chapter 6 that Jesus is the Bread of Life.

And that requires on all our parts that we make just a small effort of the imagination.

Because if we hear the word *bread* and filter it through our own experience.....*bread* which is so plentiful that the only question for us is which variety we choose, *bread* which is something that we can quite easily decide to live without .....if this is how we think of bread then we can't begin to understand the true nature of the claim that Jesus makes for himself when he says '*I am the bread of life*'.

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How does that claim come about, and what does it mean?

Our gospel reading this morning follows the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 which we heard about last week.

At the end of that story, after the people have had their fill of the food, they want to take Jesus by force and declare him king. But Jesus slips away across the Lake of Galilee in the middle of the night. In the morning, when they see

that he's gone, they follow him across the lake, and catch up with him in Capernaum.

Their first question seems innocent – *'Rabbi, when did you get here?'*

But Jesus knows why they've come, so he gets right to the heart of the matter (v26): *'Truly I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'*

The feeding of the 5000 was a sign. And a sign isn't there for itself, but to point the way to something else.

But the crowd who followed Jesus wanted the sign for its own sake, and they couldn't see or weren't interested in the thing that it signified. All they knew was that their bellies had been filled with bread, and they wanted more.

As if to prove the point they challenge Jesus (v30): *'What sign are you going to give us so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness...'* In other words – please do it again

But Jesus tells them that they're looking for entirely the wrong things. Food will only sustain their bodily lives for a few years and they, like it, will soon perish.

Instead they must look to their spiritual lives, which last for all eternity (v27): *'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that ensures eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you'*.

And what is that food that ensures eternal life? Jesus himself (v35): *'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...'*

And what does it mean to work for this food? It means to believe and trust in Jesus (v.29): *'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent...'*

Without knowing it, Jesus' listeners were spiritually hungry people who needed spiritual food. Jesus' claim to be the bread of life was no less than the claim that to have him...*or not...* is to have eternal life...*or not*.

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*'Give us this day our daily bread...'*. The importance of the prayer lies mostly not in what we're asking for, but in the fact that we recognise our need to ask.

In a world in which we're hungry...or know that we could be, or remember that we once were...we're reminded that we exist in a relationship of dependence on God.

When we sincerely pray *'Give us this day our daily bread'*, we acknowledge that we're God's creatures who know that we are completely dependent on his grace.

But in a world in which our bellies are full, when we think we'll have all the food we need, when the threat of hunger has receded out of living memory, and when the prayer trips unthinkingly off our lips, it isn't hard to come to the conclusion that we don't really depend on God at all.

The Book of Deuteronomy, from which our first lesson was taken, has something to say on just this point.

Deuteronomy is written as a series of sermons by Moses to the people of Israel just as they were about to end their 40 year journey in the desert and enter the promised land.

Looking back on the worst days of their journey, the book puts the following words into the mouth of Moses (v3) –

God humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Hunger reminded the people of their dependence on God. And the manna – like the loaves in the feeding of the 5000 – was a sign that pointed to the God who provided it. Just as the Israelites were dependent on God for *physical* food, so they could see that they were *spiritually* dependent too.

When Jesus was fasting in the desert and faced with the temptation to turn stones into bread – because Jesus too knows exactly what hunger means – you'll remember that it's this verse of scripture that sustains him.

But just as Deuteronomy identifies that hunger puts us in a position of dependence on God, it also warns about the spiritual perils of wealth (v12) –

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God...Do not say to yourself 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth'. But remember the Lord your God.

In our society, we've become far wealthier than the writer of Deuteronomy could ever have conceived. And more than just wealthy, we've become absorbed and distracted

by our material culture, by the constant noise it generates, and by the self-focused lives it allows us to lead.

Like the light pollution in a city which prevents us from seeing the stars, all of this noise and distraction obscures the fact that we're created as spiritual beings who need to be in a right relationship with God our Creator.

We are all spiritually hungry people needing spiritual food, but most of the time we're not even conscious of it.

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In a few minutes we'll celebrate the Eucharist. And the bread that we use here is also a sign.

We lift it up...because it represents the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We break it...because the body of Jesus was broken for us on the Cross, as a sacrifice for our sins, to reconcile us to God.

We eat it...in recognition that we accept Jesus as the one who brings eternal life.

But this sign, like all signs, is only good if we follow it until we find and believe in the one that it signifies: *'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that ensures eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...'*

Jesus is the bread we need. For he is the Living Bread, in whom all our hungers are satisfied.

Amen.

Sermon Notes: 12 August 2018. **The living bread.**

John 6 v.35, 41-51; 1Kings 19 v4-8

Introduction: - finding John challenging, sermon series even more so.

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Very brief overview of John 6.

Bread, reading the first and last verses of the passage; we nowadays link this to HC, but in those days bread was highly practical, daily necessity, costly in terms of work.

Bread – most usual food, most basic food, prepared daily, eaten by all (except nomads?) Depends on annual harvest, with limited possibilities for keeping over for more than one season, or buying from places with better harvest, but only if you have something to sell. In extremis, you would sell land (means of obtaining future harvests) children, self. Bread does not keep, has to be prepared fresh each, or almost each, day. Needs much work; first the farming side – preparing ground, selecting and saving and preserving seed; sowing, watching, weeding, harvesting, winnowing.

Then grinding grain to flour, mixing with yeast and water, letting dough rise, kneading, preparing oven, fuel, fire, baking.

Hebrew scriptures refer mainly to famine as cause of moving from place to place e.g. Joseph, Ruth the Moabitess becoming grandmother of king David because Naomi's family fled from famine.

As earthly bread gives human life, heavenly bread gives eternal life, or abundant life, life that transcends, gives knowledge of God....

But also Jesus "sent by the Father" and able to raise up on the last day. Jesus claims that he, uniquely, has seen the father.

about the bread:

whoever believes has eternal life

I am the bread of life

People who ate the manna in the wilderness died (later)

But the bread that comes down from heaven, one may eat of and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Reference to Archbishop William Temple as source, especially noting the refrains throughout the chapter that Jesus is the one who came down from heaven, and who will raise people on the last day. – the two way journey.

Complaining listeners – their problem was not that coming from God/heaven was impossible, but that it couldn't happen with the boy next door.

v45 "and they shall all be taught by God." Quoted from Is 54 13. "All your children shall be taught by God:" – Part of the message of restoration from exile and covenant of peace.

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.

Paraphrasing William Temple

Seeing the Father – direct experience. WT says this is only possible through the Son, and with the involvement of the Son.

Drawn by the Father – we can practice techniques of prayer and meditation, but that is a way of opening ourselves to God; we can offer time and attention, but the result is up to God; we cannot form or increase our faith by an act of will, but through God's help – Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief.

All humanity is made in the image of God, so all have a turning to find God; and attempts to find God by looking inward, by contemplation, reflection, lead to similar experiences across faiths. But because of human sin, or self-will, we can never quite achieve direct experience of God but only mediated through the Son – and wouldn't that direct experience be intolerable; surely the tales of terror at the very thought of the presence of God have the right attitude.

Elijah (in 1Kings passage) – recap of preceding passages of Mount Carmel triumph which apparently brought no change of heart in the people, or at least not enough to take power from Queen Jezebel.

Elijah in despair, lying down under broom bush to die; angel instructs him to eat and drink the provided food and water, twice, as it will be needed for strength (and enthusiasm) for heroic journey through wilderness to encounter God in still small voice of utter silence, and to take orders to anoint a different king (which would seriously annoy the present one) and to anoint God's unlikely choice for his own successor, which might not be much fun either.

This could be linked to our own Vision for Mission – strengthened by the bread of communion, and whatever God provides that supports our own faith, going out to learn God's will, and to do it.

Jennifer Uff.

## Lay Address, Sunday 19th August 2018. 3rd in August Sermon Series

Readings John 6. 51 - 58 and Old Testament 1 Kings 2: 10-12, 3: 3-14

May the Holy Spirit touch my lips, open our hearts and transform our lives

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'

The opening verses of the gospel reading that we have just heard. John reports that the Jews cannot accept this teaching. just after our reading, and in the passage that the vicar will be preaching on next week, even the disciples complain that this teaching is difficult.

Jenny last week referred to the link we make between eating the bread that is Jesus's flesh and Holy Communion and perhaps this has dulled the shock of hearing Jesus's words would have had. The idea of eating Jesus's flesh was shocking.

But perhaps John's gospel was intended to be shocking, or at least hard.

Before we look in more detail at the verses from John, it is worth looking back at the context of the original story of manna from heaven in Exodus chapter 16.

Exodus 16 3-7

**The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'**

**4 Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' <sup>6</sup>So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, <sup>7</sup>and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD.'**

The sending of manna by God was largely reactive to the complaints of the Israelites, though God made his gift dependent on families following instructions concerning the Sabbath and not gathering either too little or too much. He used the giving of manna to point out spiritual needs of the Israelites, and that they could develop their attention to him by not gathering manna on the Sabbath. Spiritual attention was made concrete

John chapter 6 opens with the Feeding of the Five Thousand that we heard at the beginning of this series. That story again starts with Jesus reacting to a situation where he has attracted a large crowd and they are far from villages where they might have obtained sufficient food.. He has compassion and uses his power to turn a meagre amount into enough to more than feed five thousand.. But when the people chased after Jesus to the other side of the lake, and asked for more signs, Jesus wanted the people to see beyond the simple providing for their physical need for bread.

The words that John has Jesus using go beyond suggesting that eating his flesh will do more for the people than eating manna did for their ancestors. He is asking more from his listeners than simply changing what they eat. To understand this, it is helpful for us to look at the Greek words meaning "to eat" that John used in our passage.

There are a number of Greek words that can be translated as "to eat". In John's chapter 6 he uses two. The first is "phago". This means to eat, devour or consume, and is used by John's Jesus to refer to the eating of manna and the tense used refers to a one time action, an event in the past.

the other word is trogo which means to gnaw or chew, and it is a slow process, as for example done by cows ruminating or chewing the cud. This word is used four times in our passage and according to the source I learned this from, nowhere else by John.

**This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors consumed, and they died. The one who chews my flesh will live forever**

Trogo, chewing, is used in the present tense indicating a continual ongoing action. Already, I think we can see that there is more going on than Jesus prefiguring an idea of our Holy Communion in which it is sufficient for the communicant simply to eat the bread and drink the blood, even if those represent Christ's body and blood. The communicant needs to chew on the flesh to capture the essence of what Jesus was doing on Earth, why he was here and to become more like him.

At this point it is worth standing back and making a quick survey of John's gospel as a whole, and here I am indebted to Tom Wright, the New Testament scholar, and theologian and former Bishop of Durham.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

So John opens with this vast and timeless vision of the incarnation.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

It seems to me that as John's gospel develops, it becomes more personal. It moves from the general observation that the world did not know Jesus to individual stories that highlight how people even those close to Jesus did not understand him or his mission. One of the most personal stories is on the night before the Passover, celebrated by us as Maundy Thursday. At John 13 v 8 there is a stark interchange between Peter and Jesus

Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.'

This is good point to pause and remember the Old Testament reading from the Book of Kings. It recounts that Solomon asks God as his servant for an understanding mind so that he may be an effective servant of the people in discerning what is right. This request pleased the Lord who granted him a longer life.

Here in John, Jesus is insisting that Peter must accept Jesus washing his feet as a servant.

Later in chapter 13 at verse 34, Jesus gives perhaps his shortest but most important teaching, and it is a commandment, giving the name to Maundy Thursday from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning commandment.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

We have finally come to the commandment to love, and it comes at this crucial moment when Jesus knew that he would be with his disciples no longer as a fellow man. He uses the past tense "Just as I have loved you" but encourages them to love one another now and into the future. Like the concept of the Word, Love has underpinned the Gospel of John up to this point but not been made so explicit. But it was already there in John 6 when Jesus tells the people and his disciples to chew on his flesh.

George Herbert, the English poet and priest from the early 17th century, wrote a poem called Love 3 which i am going to end with. By portraying Love as a character, it gives an insight into how God may be seen as love but also how that love has a certain austerity, a requirement that the beloved has a proper acceptance of the love.

It puts God in the role of host and is in the form of a dialogue between God as love and the speaker. But notice at the end that when the speaker offers to serve, love doesn't directly accept this, but insists "you must sit down and taste my meat"

The poem is often seen as referring to the Eucharist so again is linked to today's Gospel reading. It poignantly ends with the word "eat" with which we began

Simon Kirby

### Love III

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert 1593 - 1633

Love (III)” seems to firmly settle which kind of “Love” Herbert intends to celebrate. But the poem also purports to show *how* God is Love—through its emphasis on God’s role as host.

Formally, the poem is a dialogue, an aspect foregrounded by the poem’s halved spacing on the page. “Love” has the first word in the poem, though it’s spoken offstage. “Love bade me welcome,” Herbert begins, and we supply the reported snippet of speech. But what follows that promising opening—the Lord God, or “Love,” ushering the speaker in, as an eager host might a reluctant guest—is the first of the poem’s many hesitations: “yet my soul drew back / Guilty of dust and sin.” In “Love (III)” the hesitations are marked rhetorically, by an excess of coordinating conjunctions—“yet,” “but,” “and,” and “so” appear multiple times in each stanza, as do semicolons and other markers of hesitation. Gestures are accompanied by qualifications, and these are frequently signaled by conjunctions: Love bade the guest welcome, *yet* his soul drew back, “*but* quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack / From my first entrance in, / Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning / If I lack’d any thing.”

Qualifying, hesitating, and second-guessing extend all the way through “Love (III),” playing out in the dialogue between Love and the guest (the speaker or “I” of the poem). When Love “sweetly question[s]” if its guest needs anything, the guest responds, “A guest ... worthy to be here.” The guest doesn’t lack “any thing,” but everything: he needs a self “worthy to be here.” The guest, once you begin looking, is peculiarly disembodied, or embodied as parts—he is a hand, eyes, shame. When the poem begins, it is his “soul” that draws back. Confronted with that kind of despair, a good host would surely offer ready assurances, but Love’s response is also evasive: “You *shall* be he.” That little verb might suggest that in some future time the guest will be worthy, or it could be a command, or an instruction; “shall” is curiously ambivalent in assigning agency as well. The guest may be responsible for bringing about the state of worthiness, or Love might be the one to grant it, or the state may be brought on by a

higher power. But *shall* can also be conditional—the guest will be worthy only once something else has happened. The guest’s self-identification through negation—“I the unkind, ungrateful”—suggests that he knows he has come to the table too early.

Most peculiarly, the guest’s offer to serve—because his host has done too much already?—is never acknowledged. If we think of “serve” in its religious sense, and imagine that the guest is offering not just his assistance at the table, but his life to God’s mission, it become more troubling that Love ignores him. Instead, Love orders, or insists, “You must sit down.” Like “shall” before it, “must” shelters a number of possible readings. Its tone could be generous, the kind of politeness we offer instinctively to visitors; or as Stanley Fish describes it, the verb could signal a thinly veiled imperative

## T13 (P16) Jesus the Bread of Life

I want to begin by saying a very big thank you to our four contributors so far, who've addressed themselves to John chapter 6: that's Barbara, who began with the feeding of the 5000, and then John, Jenny and Simon who have tackled the succeeding verses under the heading of 'Jesus the bread of life'. Thank you very much for the consideration, insight and creativity you have brought to this splendid passage of scripture. It has been a real delight to listen and learn on each occasion.

My commentary on John's gospel, by Barnabas Lindars, indicates that John chapter six is most probably written after the form of a *synagogue homily*. This may account for the peculiarly long, narrative style of the chapter – Jenny, you used the words 'meandering' and 'rambling'! There is considerable consensus that John 6 is also a stand-alone passage that bears little relation to what comes before it or what succeeds it.

Anecdotally, the idea that it is a synagogue homily is supported by the reference in v.59 to Jesus being in the synagogue at Capernaum. If we follow this lead, the chapter can be thought of as a homily or discourse based on Exodus chapter 16, giving us a fine meditation on 'the manna in the wilderness'. The homily form is indicated by the use of both the initial scripture in v.31, referring to Exodus 16, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (although this may be more closely a quote from Psalm 78 v.24) and then the use of an additional subordinate text, Isaiah 54 v.13 in v.45, "and they shall all be taught by God". With reference to the theme of manna from heaven, when, John, you referred us to Deuteronomy chapter 8, you noted the device of God letting the people hunger then feeding them with manna, as a way of humbling them and encouraging trust and dependence – that through hunger and satisfaction of hunger God teaches that "one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord". And Simon you alerted us to the fact that the manna was not only a provision, but likewise a training in

spiritual discipline. You suggested that in this testing from God, 'spiritual attention was made concrete'.... Through the comparison between the Exodus experience and Jesus as the bread of life, Jesus is characterised as both reflecting the notion that spiritual nourishment and spiritual learning come from God, but also, and supremely, that he Jesus, actually embodies a new, enriched, dynamic and *eternal* expression to divine presence with humanity, this time as the true bread from heaven. As Lindars says "the manna was a type of the truth;... Jesus is himself the true bread, and offers eternal life to all".

Many theological questions are posed by John 6, but one that stands out is its unmistakable reference to the Eucharist. Lindars asks, with other scholars, whether some of the verses, especially verses 51-58 (which Simon dealt with last week) really belong properly within the supper discourses in John chapter 13. The suggestion they consider is whether these verses have been cut from chapter 13 and pasted into chapter 6. Lindars does not go with this view, but prefers to see John 6 as a coherent entity in itself. He also decides that the supper discourses have their own character and identity. And, as we know, John's version of the last supper stands out from the others. It has no words of institution and no overt references to eating as the synoptics do. At the supper, in chapters 13 to 17, the supreme significance of Jesus in relationship with believers is emphasised not by the breaking and sharing of bread but by *the feet washing* – "unless I do this you have no part in me" – by the pronouncement that *we are become his 'friends'*, by the commandment to love as he loves and through the motif of *abiding in the vine* in closest connection to Jesus. This distinctiveness of John's supper discourse, with no need for eucharistic symbolism, allows, then, for John 6 to speak to us all the more clearly as another of John's great distillations of the meaning of Jesus for believers: this time, Jesus as the bread of life, given to feed us forever. And John combines here both eucharistic allusions on the one hand and what are referred to in my commentary as 'sapiential'

references on the other hand. These are references to Jesus as the wisdom of God and the word of God. And here in chapter 6, we are inexorably caught up in the successive references to the true bread from heaven, the living bread, the food that lasts and living forever i.e. the gift of eternal life. The chapter draws us closer and closer towards the person of Jesus as the source of life. Early on in the chapter, the multitudes who pursue Jesus across the lake cry, "Give us this bread always": to which Jesus replies, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty!" From this point onwards through the chapter, wave upon wave of spiritual nourishment flows from Jesus.

And here we stumble on a key feature of our closing verses, which is the issue of who actually does come to Jesus and who doesn't!... that some disciples choose to go away whereas others are truly captivated. Lindars suggests that the disciples for whom this teaching is too difficult, and who go away, are the 'Docetists'. As you may recall, these are they who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh and that he had died a human death on the cross. They claimed that if Jesus was God he couldn't have taken actual human form. In the long run, they lost the argument, as indicated in the creeds; but in the context of the writing of John's gospel, it was a live issue. And we can see why they go away, given the strong carnal language used by Jesus about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and his description of himself as "the bread that comes down from heaven", as though to say, "I'm here, I'm a man, and I have come from God, so make your decision!"... and they do! They can't accept this picture of Jesus so closely identified with God. So when Jesus asks, "does this offend you?" they don't even have to answer, because it certainly does. And so they walk away.....

One of the beauties of John chapter 6 is that the actual and the symbolic flow in and out of each other almost seamlessly. For example, at one moment bread is being referred to as what can be eaten physically, while

at another point it's a metaphor for what sustains a person, and yet at another it's what Jesus is! – the true bread, the bread that lasts and the bread from heaven! This interplay of meanings lends this passage its sublime character, even though at times we can get a bit stuck on phrases like 'eating my flesh'.

Another expression of this is how *narrative details* such as getting into boats to cross the sea or the crowd asking "is not this Jesus the son of Joseph?" or finding the teaching difficult or Jesus addressing the twelve, all these contrast with *passages of discourse or musings and theologising* as the writer conveys what they want to say. The mixture of narrative and discourse is we know a feature of John's gospel, and it is found throughout the gospel. But here in this homily on the bread of life, the interplay of spiritual meanings with actual concrete details plays a very important role in communicating something essential about Jesus and the gift of eternal life – over which apparently the Docetists stumbled. This is that Jesus, as the word become flesh, was and is at one and the same time, the incarnate Lord and the eternal Word! His gift of himself as a human being experienced by disciples and the twelve is mirrored by his gift of eternal life that ever was, yet which reaches you and me and will always be on offer to the end of the world. This is John's way of articulating what we think of as the two natures of Christ, human and divine.

The multiplicity of meanings that flow from this wonderful meditation, has of course allowed each of us to draw out different yet connected key themes from John 6. John, you drew our attention to the matter of spiritual hunger and its connection to actual hunger, and the risk that material plenty can dull our sense of need for God. This left me with questions about how we stay in touch with our need to be fed in order to stay alive. Jenny, in your comparison between the necessity of making daily bread – with all that that entailed in those days – and the

requirement of bread for the journey, exemplified in Elijah leaving Horeb, you invited us to consider how the living bread sustains us through the challenges of life: that however bad things get, we will be fed and we can survive and thrive. And Simon, in your distinction between eating bread as an act of consumption versus chewing on the bread of life, you gave us an image of taking time to absorb and enjoy the manifold meanings and blessings of the bread of life that animate the journey of faith. What strikes me as I have been looking at our closing verses, is how powerful is the statement made by the final choice of the twelve to stay with Jesus. There is a massive contrast achieved in the chapter between the hordes that flock to be fed on the mountain (5000) at the outset and the fact that only twelve are left at the end. This dramatises the declaration of Simon Peter, speaking for them all, that Jesus is their Lord. There are of course echoes here of Peter at Caesarea Philippi declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, but John's language is different and distinctly his own; "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." This is a moment of supreme disclosure, equal to the disclosures of the prologue, at the supper, on the cross and when Mary recognises Jesus in the garden. That Jesus has the words of life is all we need to know and everything we need to know. The only question is, will we stay or do we drift away?! For it could be that we have found the teaching too difficult or that material plenty has dulled our desire?... Or to put the question another way, we might ask, 'what keeps us coming back'? One of the key points that this passage makes here is that we are always free to walk away! The question for you and me is 'why don't we'?! The truth is that we will all waver and question ourselves at times and, frankly, may find the teaching too difficult. But it is a measure of the wonder of grace that we too like the twelve keep coming back – and why? – because actually, often without knowing it, we have made Simon Peter's words our own, "To whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life".

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