

Sermon preached at Scots
16 August 2015

Readings: 1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14
John 6:51–58

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

This is a difficult set of images to deal with. On the one hand they are so familiar that we almost gloss over the grossness of them. On the other hand the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood are such fleshy metaphors which were disgusting to the first hearers and are revolting even now. Although most modern Christians immediately leap from this passage to the polite symbol of communion, we need to understand that the path to communion leads through the cross and Christ's bloody self-sacrifice for us.

What is this juxtaposition of images all about? Jesus starts describing himself as the bread of life and then talks about those "who eat my flesh," hardly seems an image of comfort? Yet right from the beginning of the gospel John has been giving us this image of Jesus as the Word made flesh. Perhaps it is there that we begin, for there is a whole tradition within Jewish thought about eating the Word, about taking it in and incorporating the divine Word into one's life.

In this chapter, each time Jesus refers to himself as bread, as flesh to be eaten, the crowd immediately discredits his claims. Verses 41 and 42 "I am the bread that came down from Heaven" is met by "Isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know." In today's reading he expands the notion "I am the living bread..." and the crowd responds "How can this man give us..." The emphasis falls not on the giving of his body for flesh so much as on the "This man." Who does Jesus think he is? There is the real offence. How can he be the source of living bread, of true food, true drink, because we know who he is! The conclu-

sion of this teaching results in even some of his disciples asking "Who can accept it?" with the implication they can't, and they turn back and do not go on with Jesus.

So what is it with bread, living bread that becomes so important. I want to share a story that I've discovered. It is about some of the child refugees during the bombing raids of World War II. Many were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and care. But many had lost so much they could not sleep. They were afraid that when they woke they would be once more homeless and without food. Nothing said or done seemed to reassure them, until someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow." Bread the simplest of staple foods became the symbol of hope for these children.

I have been wondering what this means to twenty first century people in an age of abundance. Bread's just not a big deal for us. You wander down the supermarket and get a loaf of pre-sliced, thanks – or an organic sourdough rye, of course! So why is Jesus carrying on about it? In order to get closer to the imagery, we need to go back and look at Jesus' context. What did bread mean to Jesus' first audience? What was bread to a first century Palestinian peasant?

Quite simply, bread was the difference between life and death. Bread meant life. No bread, death. They ate bread with yogurt or cheese for breakfast; bread with vegetables for lunch; and bread with vegetables and fish for dinner. On very special occasions, they might have small pieces of lamb. But without bread, a first century Palestinian would have starved.

Despite being the bulk of their diet, bread wasn't easily come by. No fluffy pre-sliced for them! Bread was made from wheat and barley

grains, ground coarsely by hand between two stones, and baked into rough pita loaves the same day. It sounds simple enough, but it's tremendously hard work. The daily grind for a family of six took about three hours. So women would get up about four o'clock every morning, and grind the flour before anyone else got out of bed. Even now, there are people who have to grind their grain by hand, people living in remote villages in many countries.

When crops failed, a family had almost nothing else to eat. Famine was an ever-present fear. Families were faced with terrible choices: should they plant the last of their seeds of grain, going hungry now in the hope of bread next year; or should they use them to feed their families, giving up all hope for the year to come? I wonder how people living in these situations might feel if someone said to them, if you come to me you will never be hungry? To his first audience, Jesus' words would have had a power we will never know.

That's the context. But we are all invited to his table, whether we're a hungry first century Palestinian or a well-fed twenty-first century Kiwi. So his words must continue to hold meaning for us. What, to a people who are generally thoughtless about food, might Jesus' words invite us to?

One problem is that we cannot imagine the central role bread has in life. For people of abundance, there is no main food. Get rid of bread, and we still have rice, pasta, tortillas made from wheat or corn, sweet potato, regular potatoes, rye, and barley. We can't imagine being so reliant on one of these that without it, we die. For that matter, we might not really be able to imagine, what it is to be hungry. Whether any of us has ever been truly hungry, worried sick about where the next meal might come from, in being invited to Jesus' table, we must think about our brothers and sisters who are hungry.

After all, about 13% of the food sold in New Zealand ends up in landfill, but more is wasted before it gets there. Some of the wastage hap-

pens in transport, as food spoils over long distances. Some of it happens in shops, as consumers refuse to purchase iffy-looking products. Some things are thrown out because they are incorrectly labelled, or past their use-by date, or slightly damaged. One egg breaks, and the other eleven are heaved into the dumpster. Food is wasted in restaurants. And food is wasted in homes. We all do it. We buy a bunch of radishes, and forget to eat them. We cook a meal, and throw out the leftovers – whether on the night, or three weeks later. We leave lettuce to slime in the bottom of the crisper, and odd bits of cheese to grow hairy with mould. How often do we throw out old bread ends? I whizz them into breadcrumbs; I freeze chunks to throw in soup; I use the crusts in for cheese on toast; but the rest, the rest gets tossed into the compost.

At the same time we live in a world where one in twelve people worldwide is malnourished. People are starving, while we throw food out. At the same time, around 760 million tons of grain is fed to animals to make meat, instead of being provided to the people who can't afford to eat meat and could make a meal out of the grain. And even more grain is being turned into biofuel, so we can drive around while others starve.

One of the exciting projects I have been able to support through the DV Bryant Trust is Kaivololution, set up by the Waikato Environment Centre. It is a food rescue service which since it started last year has taken leftover food from 25 supermarkets, bakeries and other food and produce stores and distributed it to 47 different groups and charities. When I first saw this pamphlet earlier in the year they had rescued over 45,000 kgs of food. Now it is up to 53,000 kg, the equivalent of over 15,000 meals.

At the start of this cycle of readings we heard the story of the loaves and fishes. Jesus took five loaves and two fishes, gave thanks, broke them, and fed the hungry crowd. What happened to the leftovers? Jesus told his disciples to gather up the pieces. Presumably they would have been used to feed others. God blesses us with much more than we need.

But instead of throwing away the excess, however, we are to take what we don't need and do something with it.

So Jesus the Bread of Life invites us to a practical response. We are not to waste food; we are to collect up the excess and share it. There are many ways we could do this. Most obviously, we could be thoughtful about how we buy, store and serve food. We could buy only what we need; we could store it carefully, so that we use it before weevils or mould get to it; we could serve out only what would be eaten; and we could make sure we eat any leftovers rather than leave them to rot in the fridge. We could think about biofuels – is it right for us to drive while others starve?

But just as importantly, we are invited to learn a different way of viewing the world, a world which God has made and named as Good. How can we, so choked with stuff that we are almost contemptuous of the material, learn to value the creation? Learn to value food? Learn to value bread? Because if we can change how we view it, then our lives must change in response.

One way is to listen to stories about the holiness of food, from the Bible and elsewhere. To the Syrians, bread has a 'mystic, sacred significance'. One Syrian writes: "I would never step on a piece of bread fallen on the road, but would pick it up, press it to my lips for reverence, and place it in a wall or on some other place where it would not be trodden upon.". We are invited to hear from these and other cultures how precious food is.

We are also invited to look at Jesus. When he took bread, he gave thanks before sharing it out. So many of us now rush to our meals. We eat standing up, or separately, or in front of the television. But Jesus invites us to pause, give thanks, and bless the food before we eat. In the simple act of saying grace, this moment of gratitude, we might learn something. We might learn to notice and be thankful for what is in front of us. We might learn to acknowledge God's presence at this moment, in

this meal, in this food. And in so doing, we might even begin to sense the sacred presence, and change our lives in joyful response.

Listening, watching, noticing, giving thanks. When we take the time to do these things, we will begin to see the whole world, right down to the slice of bread on our plate, with new eyes. We will begin to realise that every day we are blessed by God's presence, Immanuel – even at the breakfast table. Because bread is precious not only as a symbol. Like the whole of creation, it is also sacred in and of itself. And if we can only sense this holiness, we will understand how terrible it is to waste it. And if we no longer waste it, but gather up the excess and share it out, so that our brothers and sisters no longer have to go to bed hungry, then our words and our deeds and our attitudes will show the world that we have fully ingested the Bread of Life, the one who calls us to the table, the Christ.

That is why it is "this" man and not another that we follow that we have found the way to God and to each other. That is why this living bread gives us eternal life – not life in some waited for future beyond the grave, but the fullness of living in right relationship with God and with each other right now. The living bread draws us into the community that is the Body of Christ.

The Word of Jesus is among us. Hear that Word