

SERMON 12 AUGUST 2018

When I was working as a mental health chaplain I took a weekly group in the ward for older people, some of whom had suffered from mental illness for most of their lives. Some had been admitted because they were deeply depressed, anxious, grieving or whatever. This particular group was what might loosely be called relaxation and meditation, but the people needed something to focus on. One day I took in a large, round loaf of bread and put it on the table as we sat around. They passed it around, felt its weight and smelled it. Then I talked to them about going to buy bread. We mentioned all the different kinds of bread on supermarket shelves. Then I asked how they thought this particular loaf had got to the shop. Maybe it had been baked in a big oven behind the shop. Maybe it had been transported in a truck, full of loaves, from a big bakery. What had happened before that? There would have been sacks of flour. Can you remember what flour feels like when it runs through your fingers, I asked? Have any of you ever made bread? Yes, some had, and remembered the work of kneading the dough and leaving it to rise. They remembered the smell of the yeast. Where does the flour come from? From the wheat on the farm. Have you seen fields of grain ready for harvest? Yes. A couple of people had grown up in the country and began to talk about that. What does the grain feel like? It's small and hard. That took us back to the farmer ploughing his paddocks and planting the seed and waiting and watching for it to grow, hoping for rain at the right time, and then, when it had grown tall and ripened, going out with the big machines and bringing in the harvest. We looked at the bread again and thought about its story: the places involved, the weather involved, the people involved, the journey involved. We broke it open and those who wanted shared some. It connected them back to the earth itself, with all the smell, the sounds, the sunshine, rain and wind.

In the Middle East, every meal is accompanied by bread, usually flat bread that is torn and eaten and used to carry other parts of the meal. It is an ancient thing. It takes us right back to the Hebrew Scriptures, right back

to Abraham and Sarah giving hospitality to the two strangers at Mamre. That hospitality is still very evident in that part of the world: shops offering coffee to customers and biscuits too. That story from Genesis leads us on to the meals that were prepared for Jesus as he ate with tax collectors, with the rich and powerful, with the hungry thousands on the hillside, and, of course, with his disciples.

“I am the bread of life” he said. “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.” In other words, he is telling people that he is the very stuff of life, part of their everydayness, part of their fundamental need. John’s gospel is not like the other 3. It was written after them. John is not telling some kind of biography, an account of Jesus’ life in the way of the others. He uses some of the same material as them but does so differently. For instance, he does not talk about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. Rather, he is making a theological case for who Jesus was and what his meaning was for everything. There is none of the secrecy that Mark, who we are following most of this year, employs as Mark’s Jesus tells people to be silent, not to tell when they glimpse that he might be the Messiah. John’s Jesus makes the “I am” statements that relate us right back to Moses asking God who he is as he stands on the holy ground of the burning bush. “I am who I am” said God. “I will be who I will be”. “I am the bread of life” we hear from Jesus. Bread from heaven, like manna. “Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” “For the life of the world”, let us note.

This is a difficult passage for us to understand. How much more difficult is it for people who have no church background and who might hear this for the first time! Bread that has come down from heaven! This bread is Jesus’ flesh? The early Christians were accused of eating flesh when they did, as Jesus had commanded them, and shared bread and remembered him. They were hounded and persecuted because of this. For centuries the churches have divided as to how they understand what happens during the sacrament of Holy Communion, the Eucharist, as the bread is

lifted up and the blessing of God's Spirit sought. It is mystery for us, whatever we think about it. Whether Catholic or Protestant, we believe that this bread holds our relationship with Jesus and connects us with him, each other, and, indeed, with the earth and the elements that are part of it all. When we read John's words about the bread that came down from heaven and about the bread being Jesus' flesh, how do we understand what John is saying? Do we just ignore these difficult bits of his writing? Let's look again.

What John writes here has strong resonances of the much loved prologue to his gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing as made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was light for all mankind". He is the bread, the life for all people. He is the very stuff of life.

This is the Christ of the Cosmos, the Christ who is the word incarnate, the word that has spoken from the beginning of creation and that still resounds through everything. This is the Christ, the Son, who is not separate from anything but is part of all. The Christ who came to us as a man to show us how God's life is deeply part of ours, shares ours, and brings us all that we need to become more truly part of God's creation. This is about not separating our humanness off from the rest of the world, not separating our Sunday worship off from all that happens throughout the other days and times. John tells us that Jesus, God's word, has from the beginning, been speaking of God, living the God story. Jesus particularises this for us, and he also brings us into relationship with the physical world we are part of. He is incarnate everywhere.

Personally, this incarnational theology is very much where I come from. It is what lies at the heart of Celtic Christianity and spirituality and what has become so loved by so many: the expression in prayers of God involved in everything. It is not just Celtic theology. Hebrew 13: 2 says "Do not

forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. There is a lovely poem by Francis Thomson who also wrote "The Hound of Heaven". In his poem The Kingdom of God, he says:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Then further on

The angels keep their ancient places –
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis our estranged faces,
that miss the many splendoured thing.

We may not miss seeing the bread that feeds our hunger, but we can miss the way the Christ would help us see the God everywhere for us, feeding us as we recognise the touch of God throughout the creation, calling us back to know the very earth, the humus from which we humans come and to which we return.

In these times of climate change, of environmental fragility, of fearsome drought, we are being led to admit how much our human pride and self-importance has led us down destructive paths. So many are in need. So many are in despair. Surely it is as we recognise our relationships with one another and with the world around us, that we understand how much we need to listen to the Word of life that has been speaking from the beginning and has never stopped. Surely, we are called to turn to Jesus, the word made flesh, who alone offers us forgiveness and then offers us his very self, the bread of life, to share with all people.