

John 6 The Bread of Life

Last week I cooked dinner. We had gammon shank with pineapple and mustard glaze and creamy mash followed by profiteroles with hot chocolate sauce. 'Tesco's finest', I just followed the instructions on the wrapping! In fairness, it was delicious and we cleared our plates!

Food is something to be enjoyed. It's not just bland body fuel. God gave us taste buds to savour and delight in the different flavours. Similarly, when the Lord Jesus says He is the 'Bread of Life', He is more than a necessary but distant technician to facilitate our smooth passage from earth to heaven, He is a living Master with Whom a sweet and intimate friendship can be enjoyed.

Last week we considered in John 4 how he offered a woman with a 'complicated' situation 'living water', refreshed by the Spirit with His redeeming love. It appears the encouragement keeps on coming this week as He miraculously multiplies the contents of one small lunchbox to feed a large crowd and declares, 'I am the Bread of Life.'

Now this is on top of a couple of miraculous healings in chapters 4 and 5. A wide variety of people seem to be tasting this 'new life' Jesus offers, the Pharisee Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, a royal official, a disabled beggar, a crowd of 5000 who want to proclaim Him their king there and then! In the course of avoiding that, later that night Jesus walks across a stormy sea to rescue His struggling disciples, identifying Himself with the Almighty by declaring, 'Don't be afraid, I am!' whereupon their boat arrives at a safe haven.

It all seems to be getting better and better. Jesus is the Bread of Life Who generously provides all we need. Sweet.

And we could be tempted to stop here at v35 or even earlier. Many do. But that is to miss the second half of the chapter and more vital lessons.

The 12 are still trying to get their heads around the unnerving experience of the night before out on the stormy lake when the crowds start gathering again and Jesus perceives immediately what they want. More free food and miracles please! They'll gladly have Jesus as their king if He keeps up the supply of groceries and healthcare, but they don't seem interested in the Lord Himself or His message. Maximum comfort, minimum cost, that's what we humans like and at first Jesus seems like a good bargain.

Until He begins to challenge the crowd with some quite shocking picture language. He urges them to look above their physical daily bread to the God Who provides it and concern themselves about being right with Him by trusting in the One He has sent.

This will involve humbly facing up to and acknowledging our sin and repenting of it. It will mean following Him obediently just as He obeys His Father's will, even when it means costly sacrifice. We must not be ashamed to identify with Him very specifically as the One Who gave His body and blood on the cross to atone for our sins. We do this formally as we receive the bread and wine at communion but it's something we must be prepared to do every day, everywhere we are, to be identified as followers of Jesus, whatever the cost.

The 'kingdom of God' is more than free lunches and prescriptions. It is knowing, trusting, identifying with, following and serving Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who came in the flesh and gave His life on the cross to save us from our sins.

There is great challenge but also the greatest blessing here. Observe how Jesus balances these very graphic challenges with repeated promises. This is the food that satisfies our deepest hunger and 'endures to eternal life'. This is the promise and assurance of resurrection and heavenly reward beyond this life. This 'eternal life' has already begun as the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us, uniting us with our Saviour and leading us in paths of truth and righteousness.

Tragically many of His listeners are put off at this point. They just wanted healed and fed, they aren't interested in being reconciled to God or an inner change of heart. They lose interest and slope off to look for shallower, less-taxing alternatives.

There's something very real and touching about the closing section of this chapter. What must the 12 disciples have been thinking? Surely their heads must have been to some extent in a whirl? It had all been going so well. Water to wine and healing and authority over stormy seas, all these different people coming to faith, this large crowd returning apparently eager to have their Master as king...

But then Jesus goes and puts them off with these strange, quite disturbing words about eating His flesh – we can see where 1st century critics of Christianity got the wrong idea and alleged they were practising cannibalism! And the crowds begin to frown and shrug and melt away. What a rollercoaster of experience and emotion this was becoming!

Jesus asks, 'What about you folk, do you want to go home now? Have you had enough?' There's something painfully beautiful in Peter's response. A mix perhaps of bewilderment, dogged loyalty, resignation and seedling faith? Lord, where would we go? There's no one else like you. We maybe don't understand it all yet but we believe you are the one. We're staying.

In making a defence of his convictions Martin Luther once famously declared, 'Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God!'

We may feel somewhat confused, challenged certainly, a bit afraid perhaps but is there really anywhere else we would want to stand other than on this solid rock with Jesus? Here is the water of life, the living bread from heaven, the possibility of new beginning and promise of eternal life.

Some of our family and friends may think us crazy, old-fashioned, 'politically incorrect'. Let them. Many in the world today face much worse for Jesus' sake.

A good response to God's Word to us here today is summed up in the words of an old hymn:

'I tried the broken cisterns Lord but ah, the waters failed!
E'en as I stooped to drink they fled, and mocked me as I wailed.

Now none but Christ can satisfy, none other name for me!
There's love, and life and lasting joy Lord Jesus found in Thee.'

Amen