

“I AM”

A sermon preached by Revd Jo Coney at St Peter's Wolvercote on Trinity 11, 12 August 2018

Refs: *1 Kings 19. 4 – 8; Ephesians 4.25 - 5.2; John 6: 51-58*

Several of our recent Gospel readings have been taken from John Chapter 6. They all have the same theme - one of Jesus' 'I AM' statements that we find throughout John's Gospel, and in John Chapter 6 his 'I AM' statement is in various ways 'I AM the bread of life'. Or as we have it in today's passage where we hear Jesus declaring "I am the bread of Life that came down from heaven" – bread that feeds us both physically and spiritually.

God nourishing his people is a common theme throughout the Bible. We repeatedly find accounts of God feeding his people - both as individuals and as gatherings - to give life - and to sustain that life. So in Jesus expressing to his disciples who he is – using the metaphor of bread is not surprising.

For instance, as we look back to the Old Testament we read about:

- Moses leading the Israelites out from slavery in Egypt. They are hungry and grumbling until God sends manna to them in the barren wilderness. Indeed, we hear Jesus referring back to this occasion at the end of our Gospel reading today.
- Or we think of Elijah and the widow of Zaraheth whose cruse of oil never ran out
- Then there are the Wisdom stories where wisdom says "come and eat my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" – which we heard in our first reading this morning.

I'm sure you can think of many more examples

Turning to the New Testament, we think of the many occasions when Jesus fed people:

- The disciples being given permission to pluck the corn on the sabbath
- The feeding of the 5,000 hungry people who followed Jesus into the wilderness to hear his teaching, and who were fed with the small boy's loaves and fishes.
- The woman at the well who was given the water of eternal life
- and supremely we have the Last Supper when Jesus institutes the Eucharist as he feeds his disciples with the bread and wine that become for us His Body and His Blood.

All these stories revolve around providing the Human body's basic needs - ordinary bread or water - both necessary and essential for sustaining life here on earth. God our Father feeding his children.

And, of course, feeding our own children is deeply instinctive as for any parent – basic and urgent, protective, nurturing, and quite literally life-giving and life-sustaining.

To our shame we are daily brought face to face with the tragedy, sometimes the evil, of the many people in our world who are not fed, who are starving, and who watch their children dying for lack of food. This is in contrast to the greed and selfishness of countries such as ours who have more than we need but shamefully fail to share with those who have nothing.

So I wonder how we react when as we sit and listen to this morning's Gospel and hear Jesus proclaiming to us here in St Peter's, in the 21st century, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." And as we hear that God too, as our Father, promises to see us, his children, fed, not just with food for our bodies, but with the necessary eternal food for our souls.

We can accept this because we see Jesus, on many occasions, as in today's Gospel, going beyond the mere feeding of the body and saying to us, "I AM" the sustaining food not just for your physical wellbeing but for your spiritual growth. I am the bread - not just for this life - but for eternal life. And when you eat this bread you will never hunger for this bread is my body - GOD **incarnate** – given for you"

This is the mind-blowing gift he gives us in every Eucharist as we are fed, week in and week out, with the bread offered to us here this morning at the altar. The bread that we take into our very selves - feeds our bodies, yes. But even more, it's the bread that feeds our soul and which unites us in the most intimate way with Christ himself both now and in eternity – we literally take him into ourselves. That we may ever more dwell in Him - and He in us.

This bread, in this sacrament of Holy Communion we celebrate here this morning, or wherever and whenever it is celebrated is, indeed, the very body of Christ.

The bread of life - Bread which, at every Eucharist, is carried through the congregation and placed on the altar when four things happen to it. The bread is:

Taken, Blessed Broken And Shared

Actions which are rehearsed and repeated at every celebration of the Eucharist - in the great prayer of thanksgiving - the Eucharistic prayer. The church, in Common Worship, gives us many alternative versions of this prayer. We in St Peter's vary which ones we use from time to time, but all of them have these four actions at their centre. The bread is always Taken, Blessed, Broken and Shared.

So, first the bread – ordinary unleavened wafers – is **Taken** into the priest's hands at the altar, then later taken and received into the hands of every believer at the altar rail. God takes our offering of something as ordinary as bread and transforms it into the food that feeds our souls. Just as he takes us in our ordinariness and transforms us into the body of Christ here in this place.

Then the bread is **Blessed**. The priest invokes God's blessing by calling down the Holy Spirit onto it - the Epiclesis - often by the holding of hands over the bread and wine and making the sign of the cross so that it may be consecrated and transformed by God and so become for us the very body and blood of Christ – the food of eternal life – that eternal life that we were promised and claimed at our Baptism.

At the end of the Eucharistic prayer, the bread is **Broken**. The priest lifts the bread and breaks it, not only so it might be shared by all who receive it, but primarily because it is Christ's body - Christ's broken body - broken on the cross for us, so we are reminded, time and time again, that we are called to remember not only his resurrection but also his suffering and death on the cross for our Salvation. Recognizing again God's amazing humility that we see first in the incarnation of his coming down to share our human life and to die a hideous death for us, the humility that we re-enact and give thanks for in every Eucharist.

Finally, the bread is **Shared**, not only between all of us who come to the altar rail but also in union with Christians throughout the world of whatever tradition and culture, and with Christians down the ages from the early church to today.

I always find it immensely powerful and moving to remember that what we are doing, here in this church this morning as we celebrate the Eucharist, is a vital link in a chain reaching across the world each time it's celebrated, right down the ages from the beginning of Christianity until the present day and beyond. Also that our link in the chain is not only important but essential, and that we have a responsibility to look beyond our own personal and local horizons to acknowledge and play our role in continuing that unbroken chain of witness to and for Christ, down the ages and across the world.

We are all one family, God's Family, not only because we share one heavenly Father but also because we all share in one bread at the Lord's table in the celebration of the Eucharist, whenever, wherever and however it is celebrated. We become the Body of Christ. But just as the bread, the body of Christ, is taken, blessed broken and shared in every communion service, so we too are **taken, blessed, broken and shared**. We are **taken** into God's love at our Baptism and continually **blessed** – consecrated – by his Holy Spirit at every Eucharist. We are **broken** by sin and sometimes by our life experiences, and our lives are to be **shared** with all around, especially with the poor, hungry, suffering and oppressed.

Through God's grace we are indeed all '**made partakers of the heavenly treasure**'. That treasure which is the bread of life, the Body of Christ, which is not only sustenance for us here on earth, but also for eternal life, that treasure which is referred to in our Collect, and the treasure we are called to share with all around us.

Let us go away this morning thanking God for the bread of life that he gives us, not just for today but forever. The gift of his very self.

Amen