

I am the bread of life

A sermon preached by Revd Canon Dr Simon Jones on 2 August 2015 – the 10th Sunday after Trinity at St Peter's Wolvercote on the text: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty'.

The start of a new series of *The Great British Bake Off* falling in the middle of a five week stretch of Sunday Gospel readings on Jesus the bread of life is undoubtedly a happy coincidence, but like many preachers at this time of year, I have a feeling that even Blessed Mary (Berry, that is, not Our Lady!) would struggle to produce five variations on the 'bread of life' recipe we find in John chapter 6.

This morning, then, I would like to approach this theme from a slightly different angle and look at what it means for us to use prayer as a means by which we come to Jesus and express our belief in him in order to hunger and thirst no more. You don't need me to tell you that the most frequently-used reference to bread within the Christian tradition of prayer is found in Jesus' own teaching on the subject: 'Give us today our daily bread' we pray in the Lord's Prayer. To ask God for daily bread is as much a request for spiritual nourishment as it is to give us the physical sustenance we need to fuel our bodies for daily living. But what do we actually think we are doing when we offer this, or indeed, any prayer? How can it satisfy our spiritual appetites? Well here, I think, this Sunday's collect can help us.

Let your merciful ears, O Lord,
be open to the prayers of your humble servants;
and that they may obtain their petitions
make them to ask such things as shall please you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This collect for the 10th Sunday after Trinity is one of the most ancient in our liturgy and has been prayed by Christians for around 1,250 years. It first appeared in a document called the *Gelasian Sacramentary*. This is the second oldest western liturgical book still in existence, probably composed in Paris in about the year 750. From there the prayer came to England as the collect for this Sunday in the *Sarum Missal*, which Thomas Cranmer used as a source for many of his liturgical texts. Cranmer included it in the First Prayer Book of 1549, it was set to music by the wonderfully-named 17th century English composer Thomas Mudd, and it has appeared in nearly every revision of the Church of England's liturgy since that time, including *Common Worship*.

But so what? This may be of interest to liturgical geeks like me, but of far greater significance for us and, indeed for all Christians, is that it prompts us to ask a fundamental question which we all too often fail to ask: why should God's ears be open to our prayers? What's the point of praying?

This morning I'd like to suggest just two reasons why prayer can and should be our daily bread: first, very simply, because God has created us to pray; and second, because through prayer we can experience what it means to be truly human. And these two reasons are, of course, inextricably linked, because it belongs to our status as creatures to recognise and worship our

creator; and when we acknowledge God as creator, then we are on the road to understanding how we should live as those who are made in his image and likeness.

Anthropologists tell us that prayer is one of the things that distinguish human beings from other animals. We are, if you like, hard-wired for prayer, a point which leads very naturally to the suggestion that this is one of the reasons for our very existence. The Westminster Catechism, a 17th century Puritan document, states in its first article that: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever'.

We're all aware that there are many different forms of prayer and styles of prayer as well as different motivations to pray. Thanksgiving, confession and intercession are all important and necessary for the Christian, they provide us with a balanced spiritual diet and are normally carefully combined in our public worship but, this morning, I want to emphasize prayer as the means by which we discover who really are by seeking this eternal enjoyment of God.

Prayer is sometimes described as "wasting time with God", and that's a very good description of it. Just as two lovers are often happy to spend time together simply enjoying one another's company so, too, in prayer we seek to grow towards that kind of relationship with God. In such a relationship we seek to be transformed so that we can see the world and other people through God's eyes. We begin, too, to see ourselves through his eyes and learn what it means to be loved sincerely and unconditionally for ever.

In all of this, if prayer is what God has created us for, then we must never forget that it is God's initiative. We pray as our response to a loving creator who wants us to exist in relationship with him. We never make the first move in this relationship; that is always the prerogative of God. Remember the Old Testament story of the call of the prophet Samuel. He tries to discern God's voice as he prays: 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'. And these are surely good words for us to use at the beginning of prayer, silently in our hearts, whether we're on our own or in a group. For prayer is always our response to God's voice, God's call, the activity of God's Spirit in the world. That's why, at the Eucharist, and in Morning and Evening Prayer, the intercessions come after we have heard the Scriptures read; they are our response to the God whose word has been proclaimed.

When we pray in this way, our expectations need to be high, not in the sense that we will somehow change God's mind or that God will not give us our daily bread if we don't ask for it, but that through prayer we will discover something fundamental about his identity and ours. For we can be sure that if we take the risk of responding, then through prayer we will find that God's passionate desire for us is always greater than our desire for him, and in him we will discover our true selves.

The 20th century monk Dom Gregory Dix, who was a student at Merton, expresses this point very powerfully in one of his sermons when he says:

'We don't bring down God's greatness to our littleness. We can't pull his strength down to our weakness. We don't drag down his holiness to our sinfulness. No, it's the other way about. We are taken up, lifted up, out of our littleness into his greatness, our sinfulness is

swallowed up in his holiness, our weakness is poured out into his strength . . . We want to give ourselves to Him. But there is a truth of far greater importance than that: He longs to give Himself to us'.

This, surely, is why we pray. This is also how prayer can be our daily bread, bringing us into the presence of the bread of life, helping us to discover what it means to come to him and not be hungry, to believe in him and not thirst. And it is in this knowledge that we can pray with confidence again and again:

Let your merciful ears, O Lord,
be open to the prayers of your humble servants;
and that they may obtain their petitions
make them to ask such things as shall please you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.