

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 12th August 2018

1 Kings 19: 4 - 8; John 6: 35, 41 - 51

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

How do we survive as human beings? That is the question that Jesus posed to those people who first heard him preach and teach in Galilee. All God's creatures need to nourish their lives with food and water to survive, but how do we survive as human beings; what makes us human?

Give us this day our daily bread, we pray perhaps every day, certainly every week when we pray out loud together using the Lord's Prayer. *Give us this day, our daily bread*. When we pray these words, what is it that we want from God, what are we asking God for, what are we searching for?

Whatever it is, we are not the first to ask for it, or to want it, or to search for it. According to the Gospel of John, which we read this morning, those who were amongst the first people to encounter Jesus, and who knew him when he walked the earth, made the very same request. They said, as recorded in verse 34 of our reading this morning when Jesus was talking about the life-giving power of the bread he had to offer, 'Sir, give us this bread now and always.'¹ Give us the bread you're offering, they said, today and every day, daily; *Give us this day, our daily bread.*

¹ John 6: 34

Jesus said to them in response, 'I am the bread of life.' And throughout the sixth chapter of John we read that the people are searching for this bread that they ask for; they are searching for Jesus. There are times when he retreats up a hillside, or crosses a lake and the crowd, as verse 24 makes explicit, continue to 'search for him'.²

² John 6;24

What is it that we are searching for when we pray, like those who were amongst the first to know Jesus, give us your bread to eat? I am the bread, says Jesus - what Jesus are you searching for?

In this world, of course, there are people - too many people - and some even in our own country who pray this prayer literally. They are searching for the Jesus who will feed them with bread that is literally food to eat. They are in need of physical sustenance, baked bread, to relieve their hunger. And as we saw at the beginning of this chapter in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, people's hunger is something God is concerned about. In Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, and amongst Christ's disciples gathered together as the church, God is close and present in this world, manifest when people's hunger is fed.

That God should care about the hungry of the world should by now be clear to us, but, it is also clear to us that, when Jesus says he is the bread of life to feed the hungry, and when people eat of this bread of life they may never die, he is not speaking literally about himself as bread to eat. He is not suggesting that people cannibalise him to feed themselves; although in the very early days of Christianity, Christians were accused of this. When Jesus calls himself the bread of life, this is a figure of speech, a metaphor. He isn't literally bread.

We know too, something that is too often forgotten in this country and in others when we feed people, that being fed literally with bread, may be necessary for us to live, but it is not sufficient to make the lives we live human lives. Sustaining our physical bodies is not what makes us human. To sustain us as human beings, to sustain our humanity we need to be fed with something more than bread.

To sustain human life, forever, we need more than physical food. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, Jesus talks about offering his followers life in all its fullness. To live life in all its fullness we need more than literal bread, more than just food. What's more, what makes us human, what gives us life in all its fullness, our humanity, is not something that is just about us as individuals. Jesus says in verse 51, the last sentence we read this morning, 'Moreover, the bread which I will give is my own flesh; I give it *for the life of the world.*'

Jesus says that we may need to feed our physical bodies by eating in order to live, and to reproduce, and to sustain the human race, but that is not enough because the human race is more than just physical beings. It is our humanity that makes us human, and just like our physical bodies need nourishment if we are to live, so our humanity needs nourishment if we are to live as human beings in this world, in to the future, for ever, for eternity, for the sake of the human life of the world.

When we hear that Jesus is asking us to consider him as living bread and to feed on him, we don't take him literally. It's a metaphor for our belief in Jesus. We don't literally eat Jesus. That is self-evidently true; Christians don't eat Jesus. Yet, immediately he then says that by feeding on him we gain eternal life. Suddenly, we think he has switched from talking metaphorically to talking literally. We think that by metaphorically eating Jesus, we will literally live for ever, we will gain, literally, eternal life.

In Christian belief this phrase 'eternal life' has been understood in different ways, mainly because it is self-evident that people don't live forever, they die. So, bearing that in mind there have been those who think that eternal life is a spiritual existence; that human beings are made up of flesh and spirit, and when we die the flesh dies, but the spirit lives on, forever. That hasn't satisfied everyone because Jesus elsewhere also talks about a resurrection.

So, there have been those who believe that eternal life means that in some way our physical bodies are preserved after death, and that at some unspecified time in the future there will be a bodily resurrection and that believers will all live again just as we do know.

It is not possible for us to know for certain which of those is true, but what is possible to know for certain is that humanity, the thing that makes us human, is something that needs sustaining and preserving and nourishing if it is to live on in future generations far beyond our earthly lives. For the sake of the life of the world, the human life of the world, for the sake of human life in all its fullness, for the sake of human life far in to the future, eternally, it is not our physical bodies that need nourishment it is always our humanity that needs nourishment; always.

If we only feed our bodies, then we may live on, but if we do not nourish our humanity, if we do not nourish the human life of the world, we will cease to be human.

Give us this day our daily bread. We should pray this in earnest for all those who are hungry in this world, and as believers in the power of prayer we should respond to that prayer by bringing God close to the hungry and feeding those people around the world who are starving because of famine or poverty, and those people in our own country who rely on food banks. But, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' is not just a search for a Jesus who can fill our bellies, it is a prayer for a Jesus who can sustain the human race and its humanity now and into the future, forever.

So when we pray 'Give us this day our daily bread' we are praying not just for those in the world who are hungry for food, we are also praying for those in the world who are hungry for more humanity. Is there a famine of humanity in this world?

Just a few months ago in our own country there were people who had once arrived on the Empire Windrush who would certainly have said that there is a famine of humanity in this country. There are people today living in Vladimir Putin's Russia and Recep Erdogan's Turkey who might think that humanity is not being nourished well enough. Even in the United States there are those who feel that since the last Presidential election humanity is bread in short supply.

This past week, Boris Johnson MP, very recently the UK's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said about British citizens who wear a veil, women, that they "look like letter boxes".³ Does that not sound like humanity is in need of nourishment here?

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45112792>

Who knows yet whether leaving the European Union is the right or wrong thing to do? We'll know one day, but there was something about the campaign to leave the Union, which focused on immigration and refugees, that was at times starved of humanity.

We shouldn't over-egg this pudding, over-leaven this bread; there isn't a complete famine of humanity - in the Western World at least, or in the UK. That would be saying much too much. But, we should be in no doubt that if we want human life to live on, as Jesus says, eternally, in to the future - human life, not just life - and if we want this human life to be, as Jesus says, life in all its fullness, and if we want this human life to be the life of the world in ways that are not just about living, breathing, and eating, but meaningful, moral, full life, then we today must pray for nourishment, we must pray for the bread of this humanity to feed us, because the crop of humanity can dry up. And not just pray, we should act.

Where is humanity to be found? 'Sir, give us this bread now and always,' said the people. Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life... I give it for the life of the world.'

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.