

John 6:35,41-41**The bread of life**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Imagine you had been in the crowd that Jesus miraculously fed. There were five thousand men plus who knows how many uncounted women and children. And you had all been fed with just five loaves and two fish. Of course, you would be seeking more from Jesus. If you can get your basic physical needs met at minimal cost, then you'd go for it.

Jesus feeding the crowds at the start of John six was really just an introduction to what was going to come next. This whole chapter is a continuing escalation in what Jesus does and says. And if you read through the whole chapter, we see that the initial seeking and following gives way to murmuring and grumbling, and then to disputing or arguing with Jesus, and it ends up with some departing, ceasing to follow Jesus. The section we read today, though, is the murmuring, the grumbling, the complaining. And that's because Jesus starts to make claims that are a bit upsetting to the religious leaders. One commentator calls this pattern in John's gospel an 'obnoxious discourse'.

Every time the crowds seem to come to terms with what Jesus says, he makes it more difficult. As conversations go on and objections are raised, Jesus does not seem interested in making it easier to swallow. Now this is not a suggestion that we should mirror this by being as offensive as possible in our own speech, but rather, one must follow Jesus on his own terms. To be a disciple is to follow the teacher wherever the teacher leads. And so those who initially are following Jesus because he filled their stomachs, are challenged to become true disciples. Jesus does not make it easier on the crowds. He had begun by talking about "bread from heaven", and he was misunderstood. In response to that misunderstanding, Jesus made the claim both clearer and more offensive: "I am the bread of life." That's what gets us to the grumbling, the complaining, which was in today's gospel reading.

Usually for us, when people begin to complain about our own statements, the common response is to try and make this point more gently, more acceptable, less open to objection. Instead, Jesus again makes the claim even more bold and offensive to some. For example, in verse 35, those who came to Jesus would be satisfied. But by verse 51, those who eat the living bread will themselves live forever. And the abstract idea of heavenly bread gets very real: "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

How could this be? The people already questioned how Jesus could be making any of these claims. "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" They knew this was a claim of deity, a claim of equality with God. They thought they knew Jesus, knew who he was and where he came from. Jesus was raised by Mary and Joseph in Nazareth in Galilee. They understandably assumed Joseph was his natural father. They conclude that he has not come from heaven, because they know his parents.

But I wonder had they ever been told about the angel visiting the virgin Mary, or conception by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the birth in Bethlehem? And if they had, did they realise the significance? We don't really know how much they actually knew about all of that, but they did know their scriptures. They knew that the bread of heaven was the manna that fell in the wilderness. They knew that there was only one true God. They would have made the connections from Jesus back to the time of the Exodus. In the wilderness, the Israelites had neither food nor drink and would have died without God's provision. So also, Jesus has just provided miraculous food for 5,000 men plus women and children. Also like the manna story, Jesus is not just talking about the relief of literal hunger.

The manna story in Exodus is one bit in a bigger story about trust in God. God had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them safely through the waters of the Red Sea. Once they were in the desert, Israel did not trust God to provide for them. But even so, God provided both food and water throughout their forty years of wandering. And just as the Israelites complained to Moses, so also the Jews complain about Jesus. The grumbling of the crowd parallels the grumbling of the Israelites. They had experienced God's providence and salvation and yet do not fully trust in God.

It goes deeper than that. If we read the Exodus story, the manna had to be collected according to the instructions God gave. It was a training ground for learning to trust God's word. The book of Deuteronomy summarises the story this way:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

So here in John 6, when Jesus called himself the living bread, he was not claiming to be exactly like the manna, he was claiming to be even greater. In fact, he is the Word of God that gives life. The manna was just bread from heaven, but Jesus is the living bread that gives eternal life. The manna only sustained life for the Israelites, but Jesus gives life to the whole world. The Israelites ate the daily manna and eventually died, but Jesus gives us himself so that we would live forever. When God gave the manna, he gave only a gift; but when Jesus came, God was giving himself to humanity. There was no cost to God in sending the manna each day to the Israelites, but when Jesus came that was God giving his eternal son at great cost.

Jesus is taking this bread of heaven imagery to a whole new level. And it is getting more and more difficult for the people to accept. The crowds who had made such efforts to find Jesus after he had crossed the lake begin to grumble, just as Israel in the wilderness had done. Their grumbling was because they were trying to fit Jesus into their frame of reference. They could accept that he was another prophet in the line of Moses. Bread equals manna in the wilderness. The miracle of the feeding equals the food that filled their ancestors. Jesus is just another prophet. That's it; end of story.

But this is not about the ancestors; it's about the heavenly Father. This is not about food; it's about living bread. This is not something that has already happened; it's about something that will happen. Jesus will give his flesh for the life of the world. Jesus' final words, "This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" are both a revelation and a promise. This sentence reveals what is to happen before this gospel story is complete. Jesus will give his body literally. The promise is that this giving up will be for the life of the world.

If we want this life, then we need to keep seeking Jesus. But as I said, Jesus' followers need to seek Jesus on his own terms. We should be looking for Jesus where he has promised to be found. If we want the bread of life, then we need to look for every word that comes from the mouth of God. If we want the living bread from heaven, then we can go nowhere else but God's Word. Jesus has promised to come to us through Word and Sacrament by the power of the Holy Spirit. If we go looking elsewhere, we'll end up looking for the wrong thing and quite possibly follow the same pattern of seeking turning into grumbling turning into arguing turning into departing from Jesus. There is no other way to the Father. The Jesus who said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" also said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

This too is not easy to accept for many people. But Jesus is the only answer. He is the only source of true life, eternal life. He is the only one who can sustain us both in this life and into eternity. So, I pray that you keep on following Jesus. Keep seeking him in the Word. Keep looking to your baptism where he claimed you as his own. Keep coming to his altar where he feeds you with something much greater than even heavenly bread. And in him you will find life and truth and will lack nothing you truly need. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.