

# The Bread of Life

We are coming to the end of a very exhilarating and exhausting phase of the Life and Ministry of Jesus. It is the Spring of the year AD 29, just two and a half years after Jesus was baptised by John when he began his first year's ministry in Judea. The last eighteen months had seen Jesus' touring Galilee four times, this time without his twelve disciples, because he had sent them out two by two to teach his message of God's Kingdom and to heal the sick and cast out unclean spirits, as he had taught them. They came back overjoyed, so excited at what the Holy Spirit had done in the lives of those they had met. Remember this is a year before they were baptised in the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Even before that they were doing God's works.

They all met back at base in Capernaum, but so many people wanted Jesus' attention, that Jesus took the Twelve along the coast to Bethsaida, the home town of Peter, Andrew and Philip, where Jesus learned of the death of John the Baptist. It reminded him that his own death was not that far off. Jesus needed time out, even at Bethsaida it was difficult to find time alone, time to ponder and time to be quiet and pray. So Jesus got Peter, probably, to take them all in his boat across Galilee to a remote spot, where he could be alone. Fat chance of that! By the time they landed on the shore, the crowds had been running round the shoreline to catch up with him. Despite his and his disciples' own needs, Jesus felt such compassion for them, so he taught them about the Kingdom and healed those who were sick until it was getting quite late. They were miles from the nearest town and the huge crowd of some five thousand men plus women and children, were by now all very hungry. We read how Jesus fed this massive crowd with five barley loaves and two small fish. He sent his disciples back across the lake in the boat, dismissed the crowds, and climbing up the hillside, he eventually got the time he needed to be alone with his Father. If Jesus needed to spend time alone quietly with his Father, how much more important it is for each of us?

Having spent a good time taking with his Father, he decided to take the shortcut home, straight across the lake. He set off walking over the choppy water when he caught up with his disciples in the boat, who were finding the journey difficult against a strong headwind. When they saw

him they freaked out. But as soon as Jesus got into the boat, the wind died down and John tells us that immediately the boat was at the shore to which they had been heading. It is not completely certain if John records this as another miracle – instant translocation from the middle of the lake to the shore. Jesus had healed hundreds of people, multiplied food and walked in water, what's an instant translocation of a whole boat full of guys a few miles across the sea? Then we have another probable instance with Philip being translocated in the book of Acts.(8:39-40)

That morning a flotilla of small boats set sail from Tiberias to find Jesus, along with some who had camped out overnight near the place where he had fed the 5000. They knew that Jesus had sent his disciples back in the one and only boat that had been on the shore and that Jesus had stayed behind alone, but he wasn't there. Where could he be? They eventually found him back with his disciples in Capernaum and couldn't understand how he'd got there. "Teacher, when did you get here?" Jesus didn't respond. He didn't say, "Oh I just took a stroll across the lake and caught up with my disciples, several miles from shore and the moment I got into the boat, the wind died down and we were all instantly transported to the shore!"

As it was the Sabbath, Jesus joined them in the synagogue and typically he was invited to address them. This was shortly after Passover, a time when nationalistic fervour was running high with the Jews and they were all ready to come and take Jesus by force and proclaim him their King, especially after having supernaturally fed them with bread and fish. The Jewish Rabbis taught that when Messiah came he would feed people with manna, as Moses had done. *"What did the first redeemer do? He brought down the manna. The last redeemer will also bring down manna."*

At the time of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt God fed his people, who were travelling through the wilderness, on manna. Every morning when they woke up the ground all around the campsite was covered with the stuff, like Kellogg's Frosties. Two million travellers had to collect it every day for forty years to survive. It was a highly nutritious substance that tasted like wafers and honey but they had no idea what it was and neither have we today. Manna means, "What is it?"

Jesus had not actually produced manna but multiplying food was on a par with that miracle in the wilderness, which was good enough to convince these people that Jesus was the Messiah. So this Saturday morning they all made for the synagogue in Capernaum and when they were all assembled, Jesus got up to speak. When someone spoke in the synagogue, it would often be more of a dialogue than a monologue with members of the congregation asking questions.

“To tell you the truth”, said Jesus, “the only reason you’re looking for me is not because you’re interested in who I really am, but because you ate the bread that I gave you and you got your stomachs filled. Don’t just expend all your energy on food that is destroyed as you eat it and then needs replenishing the next day, but use your energy to get food that continually nourishes your inner eternal life; the food that the Son of Man gives you. He is the one who God, his Father, has endorsed.”

“So how do we do this?” “How do we use our energy the way God wants?”

“What God wants you to do is to believe in the one that he sent.”

“What other proof can you give us that you are the one he sent? Show us something we can see and believe. Something like our ancestors saw when they ate manna in the wilderness.”

“Yes, The scriptures say, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

“It certainly wasn’t Moses who gave them bread from heaven, but my Father, who also gives you the real bread from heaven; the bread of God that comes from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“We’ll have some of that”,

“Lord, give us this bread every day,”

They were still thinking of physical bread, something you could put in your mouth and eat. They were thinking, ‘with God’s bread that comes down from heaven, we won’t need to work anymore to feed our family and ourselves; God will give us his manna from heaven every day.’ But Jesus cuts through their misunderstanding.

“I’m not talking about food you can eat, I’m talking about me, myself. I’m the one who came down from heaven; I’m the bread of Life; anyone who comes to me will never go hungry again and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty again. I’m telling you this plainly, because although you’ve seen what I can do, you don’t really trust me or believe what I’m telling you.”

Jesus said some other really important stuff, but they weren’t listening; they were muttering to each other, complaining that he had said that he was bread that has come down from heaven.

“Isn’t this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose parents we know?”

“How can he say he came down from heaven?”

This was not at all what they wanted to hear.

“Just stop all this mumbling. No-one can come to me unless my Father in heaven, who sent me, hauls them in like a fisherman catching fish, but then I will raise them to life again on the day the world ends. One of the prophets wrote, “They shall all be taught by God”. Anyone who hears and learns what the Father has to say will come to me. I know, I’ve seen the Father. Let me tell you straight: anyone who believes get’s eternal life, because I am the bread of Life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they’re all dead!”

“Let me tell you about this bread that comes down from heaven so you can eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven and if anyone eats this bread, they will live forever. The bread that I’m going to give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Now the mumbling and grumbling turns to arguing and quarrelling – although they are not actually arguing with Jesus publicly their attitude has turned from an internal struggle with what Jesus is saying to an aggressive reaction. Jesus has now got a fight on his hands with the congregation; they are becoming hostile. “How can he give us his flesh to eat?” They are saying to one another.

Jesus realises their change in attitude. Does he tone down what he is saying, pacify them and make it easier for them to accept? Not at all, he cranks it up ever further.

“Let me assure you that unless you eat the Son of Man’s flesh and drink his blood you’ll never really be alive. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood gets eternal life and I will raise them to life again when the world comes to an end. My flesh is the food you really need and my blood is the drink you really need. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in them. Just as the living Father send me and I am alive because of the Father, so anyone who eats me, will also be alive because of me.”

Holding out his hands and presenting himself to them he concludes by saying, “This is the bread that came down from heaven. It ‘s not like the bread your ancestors ate in the wilderness and died. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.”

Jesus steps down from the podium and rejoins his many disciples some of whom are giving him funny looks, frowning. What was that all about? This is pretty difficult stuff he’s saying, and some of this large group of followers remonstrate with him outside the synagogue.

“Is this causing you problems? What would your reaction be if you were to see the Son of Man ascending into heaven where he was before he came into the world? The Spirit gives life, but the flesh is a waste of time; the words I have spoken to you come from the Spirit and give you life, but some of you don’t believe what I am saying.”

After that conversation, quite a number of his followers drew back and didn’t follow him any more. So he turned to the Twelve and asked them, “Are you going to go away too?” Peter answered, “Where would we go, you’ve got the words of eternal life. We believe in you and recognise that you are God’s Holy One.”

### **Jesus Shuns Celebrity Status**

Jesus had become a popular celebrity. His stories and his power to heal the sick had attracted a huge following, and the multiplied food was a massive draw for people to follow him. In Madonna’s interview with the BBC this week, she described the cult of celebrity as “people only allowing you one-dimension to live in, reducing you to a sound byte and presenting you in a way that makes you say ‘that’s not me, that’s not who I am’.”

Jesus must have felt much the same because the crowds wanted to fit him into their agenda. They weren't really interested in his agenda. This extraordinary exchange in the Capernaum synagogue was a turning point in his ministry. John had been unexpectedly and unjustly executed and in less than a year Jesus himself would also be facing the same fate. His flesh would be sacrificed so that he could give life to the world. His blood would pour from his body to give life to those who believed in him.

Those who did believe in him would '*eat his body and drink his blood*'. Now this was clearly a metaphor – he never intended it literally. What was he saying? He was using pretty graphic language to say that he did not want people following him just for what they could get out of him, for what he could do for them. The consumer mentality is nothing new, and Jesus had had enough of it. He won't let us fit him into our agendas. If we are going to follow him, we have to fit into his agenda, which is about being so completely at one with him, it's like eating his flesh and drinking his blood. He talks about 'us living in him and him living in us'. That's what following Jesus is about. Peter, speaking for the Twelve, got it. "Where would we go? What would life be without you Lord? Lord, we can't even live without you, you have the words of eternal life."

The tragedy of this passage is the way it's been turned into a religious ritual. In early church, believers lived this out through total commitment and oneness with Christ, but as Christianity spread it became watered down and was turned into a national religion; pagan rituals became incorporated into church services, which developed into the sacrifice of the Mass. Priests offered up bread and wine on altars, which supposedly turned into Christ's flesh when it was placed in the mouths of the worshippers, so they could 'eat his flesh.' Similarly the wine supposedly turned into his blood as it was drunk, so the worshippers would be 'drinking his blood'. Jesus words, which were about being totally engrossed in him, being completely one with him and following him with our whole lives every moment of every day, got turned into a religious ritual that had to be participated in at least once a week, with the fear that if you didn't do so your soul would be damned or would have to spend extra time in purgatory. All the while the worshippers lived their lives for themselves and had no idea about living for the Lord.

While there is clearly an allusion here to taking bread and wine that Jesus would later take during the Passover meal on the eve of his death, Jesus was not talking about eating bread and wine, here. He was talking about he himself being our total nourishment and sustenance.

Jesus intended to offend the hangers on, those who only wanted Jesus for the immediate material benefits. Jesus wanted followers who had no option than to follow him; whose lives had no meaning without him, who had to be part of his mission, who couldn't live without him, whose lives were nothing without his words, without being with him and serving him and going where he took them and doing what he told them. To those other followers, Jesus was an add-on – someone who made life more exciting, whose words were interesting to ponder, but not essential to their very existence. When he said challenging things, they dismissed his words but now he had gone too far and so they just walked away.

Friends God speaks to us every week at ABC, and true followers of Christ take what we hear seriously; we take it in, we ask God how he wants us to work it out; his words are Spirit and life to us and we feed on them, as we do when God speaks to us, from the scriptures whenever we take time to read them. You will hear difficult challenging things at ABC, that make your minds and hearts struggle. You may even find yourselves arguing with what you hear. But a true follower of Christ is a doer of God's word not just a hearer. So we look for ways to work it out in your own life, not just dismiss it as an interesting idea. Dave's ten points last week were so important – we've got to do them: spend time with God, have complete faith in God, don't be freaked out when we see the Spirit at work, believe that if Jesus can do it- I can do it, take steps of faith and get out of the boat, keep our eyes on Jesus and not on our circumstances, be participators not spectators, look to Jesus to save us, don't doubt or lack faith, and worship the one who deserved all our worship. If you missed it because you were on children's work or weren't here, do check it out online.

My friend Gary Mayer told me about a holiday his family went on to a Swiss ski resort in the middle of summer; a beautiful chalet halfway up a most breathtaking mountain. They were sitting outside enjoying a drink in the sunshine and the magnificent view when they heard voices coming from above them. Looking up they saw a load of paragliders who were jumping off the top of the mountain and were aiming for a target down in

the valley below them. One after another brightly coloured parachutes whooshed past them on their way towards the target. The voices they heard were from paragliders who were gliding in tandem, in pairs and talking loudly to each other as they descended. The novice was strapped to an experienced instructor who was flying the paraglider; being tightly strapped together all the novice had to do was to enjoy the ride. They soared down from the top of the mountain toward their target in the valley, hitting it every time. Gary saw an illustration of our union with Christ. We are strapped tight to Jesus. He guides our lives and we chat to him as we enjoy the ride, we have a goal, a target that we hit every time if we let him be in charge. Without him we miss out. Gary wanted to have a go, but couldn't arrange it. It has been a life long regret.

We don't have to have any regrets if we will so strap ourselves to Jesus that it is like eating his flesh and drinking his blood, feeding on him. He is the Bread of Life upon whom we spiritually derive all our strength and nourishment. This is far more than just reading the bible every day and making time to pray. We can do those things and not feed on the bread of life at all. It is about absorbing all that Christ is into our spirits as we read and pray. Don't just expend all your energy on food for your body, but put time aside to get food that continually nourishes your inner eternal life; the food that the Son of Man gives us, believing he is the One that God sent and who gives life to this world. And we aren't supposed to just keep it to ourselves. This is not a personal and private matter. Not food to make us fat but to give us energy to do God's work. There are many out there who are spiritually starving and need the bread of life. We have it, we have Him; how can we keep him to ourselves? Who can we tell? Who can we invite to Christianity Explored, this autumn?

Having come to the end of this section in our series on the Life and Teaching of Jesus, during the Autumn term we will be looking at Jesus' Parables. There will be plenty to feed on there, so let us press on in together into all that God has for us to accomplish.

*Prayer & Breaking bread.*

Phil Rogers  
4<sup>th</sup> September 2011