

Bread Week

Sermon preached at Holy Trinity Guildford, Choral Evensong,

Sunday 15th September 2019 – Trinity 13

Readings: Isaiah 60, John 6:51-69

If you haven't yet watched the latest episode of "The Great British Bake-off" then let me start with a word of reassurance: there are no spoilers in this sermon. Last week was Bread Week, and as devotees of the programme know, this is a crucial one – because the show's chief judge, Paul Hollywood, is a bread expert.

Last week we had Signature Bakes consisting of bread to tear and share. And the contestants vied to outdo each other with flavours, colours and toppings... And at one point, Mr Hollywood exclaimed "I'm not sure that that's bread at all!", as he looked at an offering so richly endowed with some sort of iced concoction that it had parted company from most people's idea of bread, into the luxurious land of, well, let's be honest: cake.

Contrast this with the Technical Challenge, which required the contestants to produce nothing more exotic than burger buns, a dozen white, everyday bread rolls. As one of the bakers said, this is just flour, water, salt and yeast – the hard part being to get the dough right, to kneed it properly and to create exactly what the judges were looking for.

And of course, the resulting offerings were highly variable, in consistency and structure: over-baked, under-baked... until we were shown one that was just right. Perfect consistency all the way through, light and airy inside, delicately crusted on the outside - the ideal bread for everyday consumption.

Give all that, it's perhaps no surprise that Jesus chooses bread for the image he gives the disciples in the reading we heard tonight. Bread matters, and bread is the perfect image for his role in God's world. Jesus is the bread of life – the living bread that came down from heaven...not the exotic confection for special occasions, but the one who promises the staple nourishment of life itself.

And not the literal sort of bread that was represented by manna from heaven either – the bread that their Jewish forebears ate in all their grumpy dissatisfaction in the wilderness as the Old Testament tells us.

Rather, Jesus is the living bread that represents the life-giving presence of God in our lives, nourishing us, enabling us to grow into the people God longs for us to be day by day.

So far so good... But then Jesus wrecks it all by changing the image, subtly but significantly... The bread of life is his own flesh. And his disciples and all of us need to eat his flesh and drink his blood if we're to experience all that fullness of life can offer.

Now it's easy for us, with our knowledge of church and worship, to hear that and say "aha, he's talking about the Eucharist, isn't he? Bread and wine, the last Supper, all that..." Except that where we are in the story of Jesus' ministry in John's gospel, we just haven't got anywhere near that yet. So there must be something else going on. Because apart from anything else, the language of flesh-eating and blood-drinking is so shocking to his Jewish hearers that they reject his message - and even his disciples are struggling to accept his teaching.

The language of the cross isn't far away when we hear what Jesus is saying – the language of blood and violence – and that could perhaps be what Jesus wants us to hear; that what's going to be needed in order really to give us access to everlasting life in God is the handing over of the flesh and blood of Jesus himself. And whatever view we hold of the significance of that, there's no denying the reality that it was through the crucifixion of Jesus that God was able to show the most extraordinary commitment to the future of all of us: the resurrection to new life of God's own son.

Yesterday was the day in the church's calendar called Holy Cross day – when we remember specifically Jesus' giving of himself on the cross. And today maybe it's good to be reminded that through Jesus' preparedness to face the end of his own fleshly life, something transformational took place.

What that transformation leads to is really the subject of that extended reading we heard from Isaiah – a reading that speaks of God’s promise to gather God’s people from the ends of the earth into a new kingdom. “Then [we] shall see and be radiant; [our] heart[s] shall thrill and rejoice”.

Gold and frankincense will be brought to proclaim the praise of God – words that of course speak directly of all that happens at Christ’s birth, and that affirm the binding together of God’s saving purposes for the whole of humankind with the birth, the life, and, ultimately, the death of Jesus.

But there’s more. Because the story is *not* just about the future, the end times, the point when we will all be gathered together in God’s eternal kingdom. The story is also about our lives in the here and the now. Which brings us back to bread. Daily bread. The bread of life. The bread that Jesus promises us today, tomorrow, and the next day...as well as at the end of time.

Because there is more to our faith than just a belief in a happy ending beyond this world. Our faith is about the reality of life lived now, in all the mess and complications, with all the things we worry about, the things that make us fearful, as well as the things that make us abundantly happy and that we rejoice in. Jesus the bread of life longs to feed us, to strengthen us, to equip us for every aspect of our daily lives – as well as to give us hope for the end times.

That’s truly something to celebrate – it makes us want to hold the bread in our hands and delight in the perfection of what we’re offered, just as those very ordinary but beautifully baked rolls were celebrated on the television last week. We hold out our hands in gratitude to receive all that Jesus promises us... and we can go out confidently into a new week and the rest of our lives, knowing that we are truly fed by the one who loves us, who walks with us and who promises that we will receive all that God can give us, now and always.

Amen.