

## The Bread of Life

Genesis 2 v15 – 3 v7 p4, Romans 5 vv 12-19 p1132, Matthew 4 vv 1-11 p967

We now have a *Gospel Gems* calendar in the vestry at St Michael's. The message for Ash Wednesday was *Give ye them to eat*. This struck my perverted sense of irony as an odd message for the first day of a seven week fast. *Give ye them to eat*. It comes of course from St Matthew's Gospel chapter 14 v16. Jesus and His disciples have gone out into the desert for a bit of peace and relaxation following a busy missionary campaign conducted by the apostles and the shocking news of the beheading of St John the Baptist at the instigation of Salome and Herodias in the court of the corrupt and weak King Herod. They don't get any peace and quiet, however, because vast crowds follow them, *like sheep without a shepherd*, and Jesus, moved with compassion for them, feels obliged to teach and heal them. Towards the end of the day the disciples grow worried about how this vast crowd out in the desert is going to be fed. And Jesus says, *Give ye them to eat*. You know what happens next. They find a boy who has five barley loaves and two small fishes which they bring to Jesus. Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks to God for it (which is the same thing as blessing it), breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples to share with the multitude. He then does the same with the fishes. 5,000 men, plus women and children, all eat as much as they want and twelve baskets full of food fragments are left over. God supplies everything that we need and more. We perhaps have very little to offer but if we bring what we can offer to Jesus, He blesses it and multiplies it.

*Give ye them to eat* on the first day of a seven week fast. The Feeding of the Five Thousand happens at Passover time. It looks back to the night God liberated His people from slavery in Egypt. That night they slaughtered the Passover lamb and ate unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Now the Lamb of God feeds the crowds with the Bread of Life. In the Wilderness of Sinai, God fed His people on the manna. They called it the bread from heaven. Now Jesus, the new Moses, gives God's people bread in the Wilderness. He, it turns out, is the true Bread which comes down from Heaven. The Feeding of the Five Thousand, then, is a foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet. It is a foretaste of the time, no the end of time, when God will finally set His people free from sin and death, when He will meet all their needs and they will enjoy eternal fellowship at His table with Him and with one another. The Feeding of the Five Thousand was, then, once and for all what Holy Communion is every Sunday (and indeed every weekday where possible) – a celebration of what God has done for His people, a sharing in what He is now doing and a foretaste of the final consummation, when a redeemed Creation will find its fruition and fulfilment in eternal joy.

And so to today's Gospel. Jesus is coming to the end of His own forty day fast. The devil tempts Him to turn stones into bread. But Jesus quotes Scripture. He quotes Deuteronomy 8 v3. *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*. At the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus gives the people bread in the desert. Does that seem like a contradiction of what He says here to the devil - *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God*? In Deuteronomy 8 Moses explains to the people that God first of all allowed them to go hungry and then fed them with manna in order that they should learn the lesson *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God*. The Israelites learnt that they depended

on God for the basic necessities of life and that was a lesson in priorities. It makes no sense to put first the ordinary material things of every day life – earning a living, bringing up a family, enjoying a bit of leisure time – and then to offer to God that portion of your life which you have left over. Everything you have comes from God. Everything is to be received with thankfulness. And God the Giver is much more important than the gifts. If you put first the need to earn a crust, you run the risk of missing out on the things that really matter in life. Whereas, if you seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, you find that all these things are added unto you. What do you really need? Everything you really need you will find in Jesus.

*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.* The Feeding of the 5,000 reveals Jesus as the Bread of Life. We also know that Jesus is the Word of God. We know that the Bible is the Word of God. It is by the Word of the LORD that the heavens were made – and indeed the earth. God said, Let there be light and there was light. The word of prophecy is the Word of God. The prophet Amos warns rebellious humanity of a famine of the Word of God. *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. And they shall wander from sea to sea and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, and shall not find it.* (Amos 8 vv 11&12). This is a much worse prospect than going without food and drink. Human beings – people and nations – are lost without the Word of God.

When Jesus says, *Give ye them to eat*, might we not think that He means that we should share the Word? Haven't we a responsibility as Christians to share Jesus? What can we do to spread the Word? Support the Bible Society or the Gideons? Teach our children? Tell our friends? Invite people to Church? Support Andrew Daunton-Feare and missionary work generally? Support our Church in its outreach initiatives such as Fresh Expressions and the public debate on multiculturalism we are holding at the URC hall on 24<sup>th</sup>. The boy sincerely offered Jesus all that he had – five loaves and two fishes. Jesus took what the boy offered, blessed it and multiplied it so that it fed 5,000.

In Isaiah 55 vv 10 & 11 God says, *For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereunto I sent it.*

The chapter begins, *Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye buy and eat; yea come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.*

The idea of a Lenten fast, indeed of giving something up for Lent, the idea of closer attention to the Word and greater time spent in prayer and more attention to receiving the Bread of life

in the Sacrament, and all in the light of the coming Death and Resurrection to eternal life, puts the whole of life in context.

In the last temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth and promises that they will be His if only He is prepared to worship the devil. “Look after number one. Have sharp elbows. Treat friends as stepping stones on your career ladder. Tell lies when necessary. Steal if you can get away with it. Kill if you have to. Exploit relationships for your own ends. Your time is your own. Charity ends at home. Work on the Sabbath. Marginalise religion or use it for your own purposes. You will inherit all the kingdoms of the earth.”

Only you won’t. The devil is the father of lies. You will gain nothing worthwhile by disobeying God’s commandments. Neither atheism nor idolatry, blasphemy nor sabbath-breaking, disrespecting your parents nor murder, nor adultery, nor theft, nor lying, nor covetousness is guaranteed to bring success even in this world and any success gained by such means is bound to disappoint. It cannot satisfy in itself. It destroys the good things you might have had on earth. It bars the way to heaven. *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.*

In the remaining temptation in today’s Gospel, the devil invites Jesus to put God to the test by jumping from a pinnacle of the temple. If you are a child of God, the father of lies argues, God will send His angels to save you. It’s nonsense even though he even abuses a scriptural quotation to support his argument. Jesus soon puts the devil right. (*Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*) Jesus also quotes Scripture, this time correctly. *Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.* Of course it is wrong faithlessly to challenge God. There is, however, a faithful way of putting God to the test and the Bible invites us to do just this. Psalm 34 v8: *O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.*

In Lent we review our lives and our priorities. What really matters to us? What do we really put our efforts into? Our invitation to the Lenten fast is *O taste and see that the LORD is good.* Having done so, inevitably we obey the command, *Give ye them to eat.* Thus God’s Church grows, both in stature and in number. Let’s see how we’re doing at Easter.