

Corpus Christi, Witney, 3.6.21 : I Corinthians 11, 23-26 and John 6, 51-58

The passage I have just read from comes from a long chapter which is all about bread! So to set the scene of our reading today we need to climb with Jesus in the hills above the Galilee lake and settle down on some green and fragrant grass dotted with wild flowers. We're told that the Passover was near but a glance at the grass could tell us that; it was only fresh and green like this in the spring. And soon this hillside becomes crowded as many people have followed and Jesus sees them heading slowly uphill towards him. Time enough for Jesus to think about what they are all going to eat – "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" is a strange question in the middle of nowhere but it seems that this wasn't the point of the question. As so often in John there are layers of meaning here but the disciples take him literally, Philip is completely stumped but Andrew, presumably after quite a search, finds a young boy with 5 barley loaves and two fish and hopes that might help. Barley is significant in that it is the food of the poor, those with money would go for wheat or rye bread. The barley loaves would have been baked in a village oven. The two small fish were perhaps salted sardines plentiful in the lake but expensive after fishermen had to pay a tribute to the official waiting on the shore. This picnic was sparse fare for so many people. And yet Jesus bids his friends to settle the people down (the word is recline) on the grass above the lake in a moment that perhaps recalls those well-known words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters." Jesus is their shepherd, making sure they are safe, making sure they will be fed.

He then gives thanks and passes the food around himself and everyone has more than enough, the verb used here means filled right up, my granddaughter would say "I'm stuffed as a chicken!" Yet there was plenty over to take home for others.

There's an interlude next as Jesus manages to melt into the hillside, perhaps whilst they are all dozing off after their lunch, and his disciples begin the long journey back across the lake. Jesus joins them again unexpectedly and guides them safely through a storm. Back in Capernaum the crowds appear again and this time Jesus issues a challenge, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." Time and again in John's gospel we have Jesus stirring up people's minds, helping them to dig deeper, discover more. "Do not work for the

food that perishes”, think again, what are you missing? And it is within this two and fro between the crowds and Jesus that we hear those wonderful words, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.”

In a poem about bread the poet David Scott laments that “We have come so far from bread”, “Terrifying”, he says is “the breach between wheat and table”. Some of us may well bake bread but I expect none of us are as aware as Jesus was of the cycle from the sowing of seed to the picnic loaf. Scott’s poem includes these words

*I go on about bread
because it was to bread
that Jesus trusted
the meaning he had of himself.*

Another poet George Mackay Brown explores the events of Good Friday –using the language of harvesters and of the flour mill ---

The 3rd fall of Jesus

Knives are sharpened to bring you down

King Barleycorn

The stripping

“Flails creek. Golden coat

From kernel is torn”

The crucifixion

“The fruitful stones thunder around,

Quern upon quern”

There’s a lot to think about when we remember that *“it was to bread that Jesus trusted the meaning he had of himself”*.

This is stark, like the words of Jesus, “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”. Some maintain that the few verses we read have been added at a later date. They do read differently and they perhaps bring in a later and more developed thinking about the bread and wine. But whatever view we take I like the idea of 2 different threads within the same chapter focusing in slightly different places --- Jesus on the hillside sharing barley loaves and fish by the lake alongside a hint of attending to the bread of life in a more formal worship setting. I like this especially this year when so many of us have rarely if ever tasted the bread or wine as we gather for communion via Zoom.

We are told in the Acts of the Apostles that the new Christians on the Day of Pentecost, “broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” as well as worshipping in the temple ---- with one activity informing and weaving together with the other ---- the breaking of the barley loaves, the receiving of the bread and wine.

This speaks to me of connection and reminds me of a question I was asked years ago about what “living” the Eucharist means. There is one point in the communion service where this became very clear to me. In the church I once served when the words “we break this bread” were spoken the priest paused and broke the large hosts into smaller pieces. It took a little time and often the congregation could hear the breaking! That is still the place when I remember those whose lives for whatever reason have been broken, sometimes I still think of people I once knew. It’s a place where the everyday world enters worship so that, in turn our worship can turn us round to go back to serve God in the everyday world. The more we look for these connections the more we will find. And so it seems entirely appropriate to read about the sharing of bread with a motley bunch on a hillside alongside being reminded of being inside the walls of the church again. Jesus gave his blessing to both and we can remember that each time we eat bread.

I'd like to end with words sometimes said as the bread is broken to remind us that what we do when we break bread is bigger than we sometimes imagine!

*“We break this bread for those who love God and seek the truth,
For those who worship in the many ways of Hinduism,
For those who follow the path of the Buddha,
For our brothers and sisters of Islam,
For the Jewish people from whom we come,
And pray that one day we may become one*

*.
We break this bread for the great green earth,
For the forests, fields and seas, for the species of plant and animal life that we are destroying,
And pray that one day, God’s original blessing will be restored*

*.
We break this bread for those who have no bread,
For the hungry, the homeless,
And all who are refugees,
And pray that one day this world may be a home to all.*

*And we break this bread for the broken parts of ourselves,
For our broken relationships and for the wounded child in each one of us,
And pray that one day we may find the wholeness that is of Christ.*

Donald Reeves

