

Harvesting the Bread of Life: Sermon Preached in St John's, Devizes, Sunday 25th September 2022 (Harvest Festival)

"I am the bread of life. Who ever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Readings – Philippians 4: 4–9; John 6: 25–35.

On Thursday, I attended one of the Creationtide talks we are hosting in St Mary's, this one by Damian Haasjes of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. It was a very good talk, but I was amazed at the lengths its funders forced the Trust to go to assemble a hard economic and public health case that spending time in nature is good for people, especially more vulnerable people. I would have thought it was obvious, because enmeshing ourselves in the web of life so transparently lifts the spirit and heals the soul. Our present Western culture often seems obsessed with the price of everything while being happy to be ignorant of the value of anything. The most transcendent, spiritual, and mystical parts of our lives are expected to justify themselves in pounds, pence, and additional Quality-Adjusted-Life-Years.

Please keep that in mind as we explore this morning's Gospel reading, containing a phrase familiar to many of you, "I am the bread of life".

It helps us understand this incident better if we know its place in the chain of events in St John's Gospel. Firstly, it comes the day after John's version of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and indeed the crowd from the day before seems to have followed Jesus despite His attempts to slip away to somewhere quiet.

Many of these people, therefore, have only the day before benefited directly from Jesus working perhaps His most high profile and spectacular miracle, feeding thousands of them with just a few baskets of bread. More than that, they have benefited from a miracle that identifies Jesus as the true successor of Moses – because it directly parallels the way God fed the Hebrews fleeing Egypt under Moses' leadership with Manna from heaven.

But despite having swallowed His miraculous bread, the crowd doesn't want to swallow Jesus' difficult teaching about the bread of life. They want another

mega-miracle to feast their eyes on, and shortly after this morning's passage, when he doesn't give them one, the crowd turns on Jesus, and He starts to lose followers.

I think there is something profound and easily missed here about our insatiable appetites. One miracle, even if it's, you know, pretty spectacular, is not enough to convince the crowd of Jesus' nature. Accepting that we have enough is difficult for us. That lies at the root of our present ecological crisis.

It's probably built into our nature to constantly look for that extra margin of material security. We would probably never have emerged as a species from the evolutionary process without a bit of greed. Now, however, we're taking too much out of the rest of the system of life, and threatening our own survival.

In our Gospel, instead of a spectacular sign, Jesus offers the crowd Himself as the Bread of Life, which leaves no one hungry. In other words, He offers them the Eucharist.

The Eucharist means many things and works on many different levels. We take bread and wine and bless them – these are the products both of God's gifts to us in nature and our human ingenuity in using them. So one thing the Eucharist does is to proclaim that blessings result when humanity co-operates with God. Another thing the Eucharist does is to unify the spiritual and transcendent with the material and temporal. It strikes me that these things – human co-operation with God and uniting the material with the spiritual – are crucial for dealing with our ecological crisis.

As I alluded to at the start of this sermon, modernist ways of thinking blind us to the importance of the spiritual and transcendent. A famous German sociologist named Max Weber, writing in the late 19th Century, named this process "disenchantment". Some of you will be familiar with the name Max Weber, and some of you won't be, but please accept my assurance that he is one of the most influential figures in shaping how people today view the world. For Weber, the world lost its enchantment when people gained scientific tools to explain things like reproduction, the origin of the species, and the night sky.

But Weber was wrong – the world remains enchanted. The miracle of life is perpetually spellbinding. There was no disenchantment of the world, just an enormous human effort to convince ourselves that creation was no more than the sum of its parts. So deep was this sort of high modernist veil over our thinking that when contemporary ecological ideas began to emerge in the 1960s, arguing that the world was wrapped in interconnected systems where everything was interdependent on everything else, it was heralded as some sort of extraordinary breakthrough. Yet this had always been obvious until a few hundred years ago when modernity arrived with its endless need to analyse and classify and pick everything apart.

Modernism told us that the enormous leap in human knowledge and raw physical power meant we no longer needed God. Yet that knowledge and power enabled us to reshape life through genetic modification, to impose massive changes like climate change on the entire biosphere, and indeed to wipe ourselves out. We are in trouble.

It is only when we accept that there is a creator God that we can understand our correct relationship to the created order. We are part of the created order rather than being above it; indeed, we are entirely dependent on the rest of the created order. We only borrow the Earth from God, at His command and by His permission. Our rejection of that dependence on God is at the root of many of our troubles.

The scale of the problem facing us with climate change can leave us feeling overwhelmed, like a rabbit in the headlights, so convinced nothing we do can make a difference that we don't even try. At the same time, the hectoring tone many climate crusaders use can irritate us to the point of digging our heels in, especially when it is deployed by people who clearly generate plenty of CO² themselves.

Cynicism can present itself as clever and doom-mongering can present itself as taking the moral high ground. The reality is, however, that there is hope – and hope is a vital ingredient for anyone setting out on a difficult journey.

Not everybody likes big numbers, but here's a killer fact: even adding the carbon dioxide produced in imported goods to our own total, emissions in this country fell 28% between 2005 and the pandemic. It's one of nearly 40 countries where that's the case, most of them rich high carbon emitters, but also including relatively poor countries like Jamaica and El Salvador. I'm sorry to hit you with so much data on a Sunday morning, but I wanted to underscore that there are real grounds for hope that we can fix things, if we put our hearts and minds to it, if we remember whose planet it is.

"Do not worry about anything", writes St Paul in this morning's Epistle, but "Keep on doing the things you have learned and heard and seen from me." This was from the letter he wrote to the Christians in the city of Philippi in what is now northern Greece. He wrote this letter while he was in prison, probably in pretty grim conditions, yet it is so hopeful, because it is focused on things that are eternal.

So keep at it – don't feel overwhelmed. Keep doing what you can and don't feel bad about not being able to solve the world's problems on your own. Stay informed about what's happening in the world but never forget that the media needs to sensationalise and catastrophise to keep audience share. Don't lose hope – for there is hope.

Keep praying and breaking bread in the name of your brother Jesus and He, the Bread of Life, will show you the way, for it is ultimately His creation.

And now to the Father who made us for Love, to the Son who paid the price of Love, the Holy Spirit who breathes perfect Love, be ascribed all glory and majesty, dominion and power, as is most justly due, world without end. Amen.