

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost Yr B 2 August 2015

Exodus 16. 2-4, 9-15 Psalm 78. 22-28 Ephesians 4.1-16 John 6. 24-35

Jesus had fed a crowd of five thousand with two fish and five loaves. We thought about that last week, and what I might mean for us. The crowd was mostly day labourers; they were people who had to work hard for a living, at fishing or farming.

No surprise then if the crowd thought: we won't have to work hard the way we do, if food can be found for free. Let's find Jesus again and see if we can't be fed again! The crowd chased Jesus around the Sea of Tiberias. When they found him they asked Jesus a strange question, given what has happened. They say, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus understood the crowd's motive. The bread Jesus had provided reminded them of the manna in the wilderness, the bread that God had provided on the journey out of Egypt. But the crowd missed the meaning of Jesus' sign, and only wanted free food! They had had the experience, but they missed the meaning. All the crowd wants is a new prophet like Moses. Their preconceived ideas are preventing them from understanding that someone greater than Moses has come among them.

So, Jesus has to teach them how to 'read' receive/understand their own story, their Hebrew scriptures. It was not Moses, as some wonder worker who fed your ancestors in the wilderness, says Jesus, but God who provided. But wait, there's more Jesus says. That manna bread you think Moses provided was food that perishes. Those who ate manna still died. It was a past event but it is also a prefiguring of what is happening right now, Jesus is telling the crowd. My Father, the God of Israel, is giving you bread that does not perish; those who eat this bread will not die. Jesus is the *true meaning* of the manna story

Like the Samaritan woman at the well who wants the water that satisfies all thirst, the crowd asks for the bread that satisfies all hunger. And, just as Jesus had made himself known to the woman, now he makes himself known to the crowd: I am, he says, I am what you are asking for. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

The crowd is trying to understand Jesus. 'Give us this bread always,' they ask, but they are still wanting the kind of bread that fills the stomach, not the true bread that nurtures the heart and gives life to the world.

Is it just co-incidence that the story of humanity's fall from grace centres on eating! I think not! In that story, the characters, the Adam and the Eve eat food which God did not give to them, and their relationship with God, with one another and with the material world, the whole creation itself is broken.

Is it just 'pie in the sky' that the life of the world to come is spoken of as a banquet? Is it just coincidence that the story of humanity's redemption centres on eating and drinking? I don't think so! In today's gospel Jesus offers the food that only God gives which makes possible our communion, our reconnection, our reconciliation, our at-one-ment, atonement with all that was lost when the Adam and the Eve ate 'junk' food.

We come to this table as God's guests, and when we look around we see one another also as God's guests. In gathering to share in holy communion we do well to remember that Jesus wants our company, and calls us to be here. All through his ministry Jesus kept inviting people to meals. His critics called him a party animal' and dismissed his behaviour as frivolous. But Jesus was laying the foundations for a new people of God; a people who respond to God's invitation through him. This is who we are to be and become. The risen Jesus continued to gather his friends for a meal; time and time again the stories of resurrection are stories of eating and drinking with Jesus. The apostles identify themselves as the witnesses who 'ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead'(Acts 10.41)

When does the gathering begin? When you and I decide to leave home in response to the invitation. It begins when we leave aside whatever else we could do today, to form the *ecclesia*, the assembly of God's people who eat and drink with Jesus, risen Christ, who so eat and drink his life that it becomes our life.

We Anglicans have a prayer, *The Prayer of Humble Access*, a prayer before receiving communion, which many here would be able to pray from memory. It's a Thomas Cranmer Book of Common Prayer original and been part of our worship since 1548. The prayer expresses these truths for us in its closing words:

grant us therefore gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ,
and to drink his blood,
that we may evermore dwell in him,
and he in us. Amen.

Like the crowd that needed a new understanding of the story of the manna, perhaps we need a new imagination about what we do when we come to the Lord's table. Perhaps we need a new sacramental imagination that extends the gift of God's own life in bread and wine to all the material world around us shot through with the glory of God, as one poet saw it.

We need a new sacramental imagination that believes when we gather as God's guests around God's table, the Church becomes what we are meant to be.

We need to understand that we are to become what we receive in holy communion; we are to become what we receive when we eat the bread and drink the cup, the symbols that nourish us with the very life of Jesus.

So, again this week the bread will be given into your hands with these words:

Become what you receive.

To which the response is: *The Body of Christ.*

A sermon preached by the Vicar on 2 August 2015

