

“Eat and be filled”

In today’s readings there is lots of talk about food, especially bread. The readings from Exodus and the Psalms focus on manna from heaven—the bread of angels. Jesus talks about real bread that fed the five thousand on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.¹ His discussion is also about bread as a metaphor for his life-giving body and believing in him as the Son of God. If your breakfast was small all this talk of bread might make you want to sneak out for Danish and coffee.

Food is a necessity. Some of us may have experienced hard times and a lack of food. We know that some people are so desperate that they scavenge food out of garbage cans. Others rely on soup kitchens and food pantries so that they have enough food to feed themselves and their families. During the Great Depression families often made do with biscuits. Flour, lard and water were cheap and the biscuits were filling if not terribly nutritious. Some of us garden as a hobby and others garden just to have food. In the wealthiest country in the world a major social issue is food insecurity. In cities there are large areas with no grocery stores and limited transportation to get to one. These are called food deserts which evokes the plight of the Hebrews in the wilderness of Sinai during the Exodus.

Food can also be a luxury. Years ago I worked in a gourmet food shop selling Belgian chocolates, French wines, coffees from around the world, teas, spices, dried fruits, pastries, and groceries from the world over. During those years I don’t think I ever considered those who did not have enough to eat. My job was to find foods with fine flavors, exotic aromas. We wanted to bring to our customers the best food the world had to offer. The worst food we ate was something scrumptious but a bit damaged such as a slightly melted chocolate or a smashed wheel of brie. It might not look good but it still tasted good.

The people in these Bible stories do not know much about luxurious food. Those during the Exodus are moving through miles of hot wasteland on a daily basis. They did not know where their next meal was coming from. Even the people in Jerusalem with whom Jesus is conversing are likely to be living hand to mouth. Subsistence living was the norm. There were no fancy restaurants or even fast food joints in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. What was fresh in the market was what they ate if they could afford it. Otherwise, they would have eaten the first century equivalent of biscuits to fill their bellies.

When Jesus speaks of God giving their ancestors bread from heaven, it must have seemed incredible. Imagine flour that simply appeared each morning after the dew had dried. When Jesus says, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,” their hungry bellies must have thought they were dreaming. It is no wonder that they said, “Sir, give us this bread always.”² It would be a wonder to have bread that comes without hard work and is life-giving, not just stomach filling.

¹ John 6:1-15

² John 6:34 NRSV

Remember the Samaritan woman whom Jesus encountered at the well earlier in this Gospel?³ Jesus spoke to her of living water that once she tasted it she would never be thirsty again. When she heard about that water she dropped her bucket and begged Jesus saying, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”⁴

No one can blame the people in the Temple or the woman at the well for hoping that their need for the essentials of life could be solved by something Jesus promised. But Jesus was not some internet huckster trying to sell them a “miracle” cure for poverty and hard work. Jesus, via metaphor, was trying to show them that God offers more than the basics of life. He tells them clearly, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”⁵ Jesus was not denying the importance of their necessities, but he was trying to get them to look beyond their physical needs to something more. God offers an abundance of love, joy, and hope that do not run dry or run out.

If it was a tough sell to the hungry and impoverished, it seems impossible to talk about the bread of life to people who can have breads of every shape, ingredient, and heritage at the local supermarket. Bread is mundane. Some nutritionists tell us not to eat bread. Bread which was a staple of existence for thousands of years is now considered bad for our health. The bread that we use for Holy Communion is hardly even representative of bread. The metaphor Jesus was using two thousand years ago may have worn out.

If that is the case, then substitute something that you think is essential to your existence but not free. Not something luxurious, but basic. Maybe it is the vegetables of life, or the meat of life, or the milk of life. Jesus is saying that whatever you think is essential and life-sustaining is nothing compared to what he offers. What he is offering is not just life-sustaining it is life-giving. It is not simply something that enables us to get by, what he has to offer makes life worth living. Even a difficult subsistence existence is worth living because of the richness of that which he offers.

That is what Jesus is talking about whether it is the bread of life or the living water. It is the love of God that will sustain us even in our darkest hours. It is the love of God that will fill us when the luxuries of this world leave us feeling hollow and dead. God does not make empty promises. God will provide for us as surely as God provided for the Hebrews wandering in the desert. What God provides is the bread of the angels and the bread of life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man, the Messiah, and the Son of God. Eat of him and be filled.

³ John 4:1-42

⁴ John 4:15 NIV

⁵ John 6:27