

# The Bread that Lasts

## Ephesians 4:17-25; John 6:24-35

*Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt*

Dallas, 2 August 2009

[So on the next day,] when the people [who remained after the feeding of the five thousand] saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Lord, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”

### **Hungry People**

The Gospel reading of today speaks about people who followed Jesus *because they were hungry*. They needed food. In our Western societies hunger is hard to conceive. When our stomachs or appetites signal an inkling of a desire, we open our refrigerators and we immediately satisfy our desire for food and drinks – just as we have become accustomed to instant gratification of *all our desires*.

I have lived in Egypt for the past 18 years now; in Egypt, about half of the people earns less than 2 dollars per day. Millions of people go to bed hungry each night, because they are simply too poor to buy good enough food. Many live on a bowl of rice and some weak tea with sugar as their daily diet. If they feel hungry they cannot walk to a well-stocked fridge - because they have no fridge.

Many fathers and mothers in this world simply do not have the means to properly look after their children and safeguard the quality of their life. This undernourished life is a great threat to their health, and especially children suffer from it – and often die from diseases that could have easily been prevented – if people had a few more dollars for medicine.

Jesus met many hungry and diseased people. There was so much poverty in ancient Israel. When Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 men - women and children are not included in this number - this was, *simply because they had no food*. (John 6:5) These were not upper-middle class people who by accident had collectively forgotten to bring their lunch boxes – these were the poor, the have-nots, and people in grave need.

The miraculous feeding of these thousands of people happened on the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee; after it was finished, in the night, our Lord Jesus Christ went alone to the other side of the lake, the West side, to the City of Capernaum. And lo and behold – there were again these same thousands of hungry poor! They wanted to see Jesus, so they had followed him around the lake.

## **The Food that does not last**

Yesterday these thousands had received food from Jesus, and today they wanted more. More food. And they had great expectations of Jesus – someone who could miraculously feed the poor, was he not all they needed? He was certainly ‘good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18)

The apostle John writes, that ‘when the people saw the sign that he had done, they said: “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!”’ (John 6:14)

Israel expected a prophet similar to Moses, and this miracle-doer from Nazareth certainly qualified! Moses gave manna in the desert, and this Jesus did exactly that!

In the Muslim world, Jesus is highly respected as a Prophet. Islam teaches that Allah has sent his prophets to every society throughout history. These prophets are perfect human beings, chosen by Allah to be his mouthpiece and for bringing a holy book to their nations. And the most highly respected prophets in Islam are

- Moses, who brought the Thora to Israel, and
- Jesus, who brought another book, called the Gospel, and in the end,
- Muhammad who brought the Quran, in the first place for the Arabs, but also for the whole world.

Islam recognizes that Jesus did great miracles, and it refers vaguely to this time when Jesus multiplied food for the hungry. In the Quran we read:

When the disciples said: O Jesus, son of Mary! Is thy Lord able to send down for us a table spread with food from heaven? [...] Jesus, son of Mary, said: O Allah, Lord of us! Send down for us a table spread with food from heaven, that it may be a feast for us, for the first of us and for the last of us, and a sign from Thee. (Q 5:112, 114)

Islam's view of Jesus is not very different from those hungry thousands who flocked to Jesus in Capernaum. Jesus is a prophet, sent from God, who can do great miracles through the help of God. He was a perfect man, and Islam respects Jesus so greatly, that it just *cannot* conceive that God would ever let him die on a cross.

Islam denies the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus. As it also denies his resurrection from the dead. According to Islam, He never died – God took him straight into heaven at the time when the leaders of Israel tried to crucify him.

The Islamic thinking behind this is very reasonable: Would God ever let his servants suffer like that? If someone truly obeys God, God will bless him with all he or she needs – health and wealth, every conceivable

blessing. Suffering is not for God's good servants, suffering is for evil-doers! So if you suffer, you must have done something wrong.

What a twisted concept. St Paul wrote in his letter to the Church in Ephesus about the gentiles: '[T]hey are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.' (Eph 4:17-18)

I do not live among the Arabs with the idea that I am any better than they are, and I also realize that, just as they have made themselves a false image of Jesus Christ, we in our own societies, and Churches, even in our own life, are also tempted to create false images of Christ.

In our Western world we have many Jesus-images. The New Age Jesus for instance helps people to have a consciousness of the divine in ourselves. And the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar – he is a prophet who with burning eyes preached social revolution... We have a Republican Jesus, a Democrat Jesus, a black Jesus, a white Jesus. He seems to bless all of our own views and constructions of society.

In our Churches, how do we perceive our Lord Jesus Christ? I fear, often not very different from those thousands of hungry Jews who came to Jesus. Many times we see Jesus in the first place as the one who satisfies our own needs. And o my, we have long wish lists... We are also very hungry...

- We hunger for being loved for who we are,
- to be pitied for what we've gone through,
- we hunger for feeling intimately understood, to be accepted unconditionally;
- We want to experience a sense of personal significance and meaningfulness,
- to be successful in our career,
- to know our life matters,
- to have an impact;
- We want to gain self-esteem,
- to be affirmed that we are okay,
- to be able to assert our opinions and desires;
- We want a sense of adventure, excitement, action, and passion
- to experience life as thrilling and moving.

We need something, and Jesus gives. We like something, he likes it too. He is there for us.

You are sick? He makes you healthy. You need money? He makes you wealthy.

You have low self esteem? He affirms you...

You want something? Name it and claim it!

As Christians we desire instant gratification for all of our desires, and our Jesus gives all that, *now. Here and now.* We do not like waiting, we do not accept suffering, no crosses for us. We are, after all, Christians, so we expect Jesus to make our lives perfect. Perfect according to our own desires.

The latest addition to these Jesus-images is particularly popular in large parts of the Episcopal Church, the Jesus who endorses each and every human relationship as long as there is 'love and commitment'. Never mind what the apostles and the Church throughout the centuries has been teaching, we have our own Jesus.

The Jesus who gives us what we like and who allows us to live as we like as long as we say our prayers.

Thus we have made him into a sort of Father Christmas.

We want our fill of loaves and fish, but maybe we have forgotten to look at the actual Jesus and what he signifies... Who he really is and what he asks of us.

## **Seek ye First...**

Jesus was critical of those thousands of poor and hungry who had followed him, because of their focus on temporal food. He told them:

I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (John 6:26-27a)

For Jesus, not the food he gave them, but what the miracle *signified* was important. Instead of focusing on the temporary food, the this-worldly blessing, they should have focused on the meaning of the miracle.

And Jesus explained the lesson of the feeding of the 5000 now: it should make people understand that He is able to give people the food that endures to eternal life. Not our welfare in this earthly life, but eternity should have our prime interest.

Jesus points us to that other life, beyond what we can see and touch. He points our hearts and our minds to the realm of God his Father, the dimension of the Spirit in which we live, and that surrounds us, invisibly, everywhere. 'Seek ye first seek the Kingdom of God', is what Jesus tells these poor followers of him.

Focus on life eternal, not on our needs in this life.

These are difficult words of Jesus. We are so used to focusing on our present life, on here and now, that God and his world are often only the *postscript* in our life. Or *the icing on the cake*.

In Egypt, I have learned much from poor Christians, who have nothing in this life, except their trust that God will – one day – make all things good. I have seen so much more trust in God, and a strong desire for living in eternity with Him. In the midst of their poverty, their sicknesses, the hope of being with God forever is truly comforting to them.

In Iraq I have come across so many devastated Christian who have learned to trust in God and that their life is safe in Him, even in the most abysmal of circumstances. In their misery, they have learned to seek the Kingdom of God before all things, and to expect a new heaven and a new earth.

In Sudan, I have seen how the Church there is prepared to stand up against evil rulers, and how bishops and priests are prepared to stand for Biblical truth and pay with their life. Because they know that this life is temporary... and they await the eternal kingdom of God.

They have seen how Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000 and they have understood that this means, that He is the one who holds eternity in his hands.

The Jewish masses that had come to Jesus, asked him: 'what must we do!' Jesus answered: 'believe in him whom [God the Father] has sent.'

## Jesus is the bread

The Jews were not so easily convinced by these words of our Lord Jesus Christ. They understood perfectly well that he was speaking of himself as more than a mere prophet. How can He ask us to believe in Him? We believe in God – can we also believe in Jesus? Does he not hereby claim to be somewhat... divine?

They had already concluded that he was like Moses, and they believed he was the prophet that Moses predicted would come one day. But Jesus now spoke of himself as the Son of Man – which was a divine title, and he said that God was his Father. So was He more than a prophet?

So they asked him:

Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? Our fathers ate Manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' (John 6:30-31)

What a strange question, after they had seen Jesus miraculously feed 5,000 people. Was that not significant enough? Maybe they thought the miracle of Jesus was smaller than that of Moses, as Israel was fed in the desert for many years, while Jesus refused to present the Jews with another miraculous meal.

Who are you Jesus?

Jesus then answers them with a statement that most certainly points to our Holy Eucharist. On the previous day, when He fed the 5,000, he 'took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples' (John 6:11) The same words that we read at the Last Supper of our Lord with his disciples. (Mat 26:26-29) And the same words St Paul repeats as the institutional words for the Holy Eucharist, and we continue to use them. (1 Cor 11:24)

Now, the day after, Jesus underlines how we must see his feeding of the 5,000 in the light of eternity and we see how this points to our Eucharist:

My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. [...] I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6: 32b-33, 35)

‘God our Father, give us this day our daily bread’.

What we believe about the Lord Jesus Christ is of vital importance because God offers Him as our bread.

We are to believe in him and receive him in order to have eternal life.

God offers our Lord as the means for us to grasp eternity.

When St Paul spoke of the hardness of heart of the gentiles, and about their lifestyle of sensuality and greed. Their life centered on the immediate gratification of their desires. Against that lifestyle, Paul says: ‘But that is not the way you learned Christ!’

The believers in the early Church has received specific teachings about Jesus Christ. The Apostles had taught them, dogmatically, theologically, who Jesus was. Paul also says: ‘you were taught in him’.

To know who he is, is of great importance as, in the words of Paul, ‘the truth is in Jesus’. (Eph 4:20-21)

The early Church did not present Jesus as a prophet who spoke words of wisdom, good words, truth about God. The early church presented Jesus Christ as Truth himself. As the incarnation of Truth. As God.

Just as Jesus does not offer us bread that gives us eternal life. He says that he himself IS that bread. He does not give a sign, he IS the sign. He is the Bread that God gave from heaven for the eternal salvation of mankind. The incarnation, the coming of the Son of God to our world, is the great message of the Church.

In Christ Jesus – *born of the virgin Mary, who died on a cross and who rose on the third day*, we meet with God; looking him in the face – as he truly is – transfers us into the world of God, into eternity.

In Judaism, God gave a law.

In Islam, God send a book from heaven.

In the Christian faith, God came himself. And he gave himself to die, he became our bread – to give us eternal life.

The idea that Jesus is like Father Christmas, that he gives us all we want, health and wealth, is not only untrue, it is also very unpastoral; What a miserable message this is for the millions and millions of suffering people in the world. For hungry people, for sick people, people who have stress in their business, who have family problems, people who are depressed... It sends them into a dark night by telling them that there must be something wrong with them.

But we have the great message of the Gospel of our Lord.

God stoops down to be with you in your misery. To be with you, and me, in our problems, and failures, and sadnesses. He does not promise to change those circumstances now, but he promises to be Immanuel, God with us, here and now.

What comfort that God offers himself in bread and wine to be part of your life, to sustain you, to bless you with communion with Him – *even in the midst of your present problems* of whatever sort they are.

And he gives you the gift of eternal life, that is, his presence today, and being with him in his eternal Kingdom as well,

where all tears will be wiped from our eyes, and no more death, no mourning, no crying, no pain, for *then* – finally, these things will have passed away (cf. Rev 21:4)

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.