

The Bread that Lasts

Ephesians 4.17-25; John 6.24-35

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How large is your fridge? We have a tiny one, with a reasonable freezer under it. I find my fridge too tiny. But I can get what I want any time of the day. And if it is not in the fridge, then a Lidl supermarket is just 600 meters away.

The Gospel reading of today speaks about people who followed Jesus because they were hungry. They needed food. There had nothing to eat. No fridge, no Lidl.

In our Western societies hunger is hard to imagine. When our stomachs or appetites signal just 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 was in Egypt this week, where about half of the people have to live on less than two euros per day. Millions of people go to bed hungry each night, because they are simply too poor to buy good enough food.

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.

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 shore 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, to the West side, to the City of Capernaum.

And there they were again, these same thousands of hungry poor! They wanted to see Jesus, so they had followed him around the lake.

1. 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 – someone who could miraculously feed the poor, was he not all they needed? He was certainly ‘good news for the poor’.

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, he qualified! Moses gave manna in the desert, and this Jesus did the same! What a prophet!

In the Muslim world, Jesus is also highly respected as a Prophet. Jesus belongs to the most highly respected prophets in Islam. And it recognises that Jesus did great miracles. Their book, the Quran, 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 [...] and a sign from Thee. (Q5.112,114)

Islam’s view of Jesus is not very different from those hungry thousands who flocked to Jesus in Capernaum. Islam does not accept the idea that God would let his holy servant die on a cross, but it believes that if you do good, you will be blessed with earthly wealth. With food. With everything you desire.

They envision Jesus as a do-gooder, and there is not place for suffering and for the cross.

That is a false image of Jesus. But we, in our societies, and in our Churches, we ourselves, often also entertain one-sided images of Christ.

We have many Jesus-images. The New Age Jesus, for instance, helps people to have a consciousness of the divine in ourselves.

And the social Jesus – he is a prophet who with burning eyes preaches social revolution... And there is the liberal Jesus, a white Jesus, a black Jesus, a Jesus for women.

He seems to bless all of our own views and constructions of society. Many times we see Jesus in the first place as someone who thinks like we do and who satisfies our own needs. And we are very hungry...

- We hunger for being loved for who we are,
- for being pitied for what we’ve gone through,
- we hunger for feeling understood,
- to be accepted unconditionally,
- We want to experience a sense of personal significance and meaningfulness,



- we hunger for success in our career,
- to know that our life really matters,
- we hunger for self-esteem,
- for being affirmed that we are okay,
- We hunger for adventure, excitement, action, passion.

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 are children of our own societies and 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.

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

2. 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.

And Jesus then explained the lesson of the feeding of the 5,000: it should make people understand that He is able to give people the food that endures to eternal life.

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 everywhere. 'Seek ye first seek the Kingdom of God', is what Jesus tells these poor followers of him.

Focus on life eternal, not on your 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.

I have learned much from the poor Christians we meet in Egypt; people 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.

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.

When Jesus had explained this to the Jewish masses, they asked him: ‘So what must we do?’ Jesus answered: ‘Believe in him whom [God the Father] has sent.’

3. Jesus is the bread

The Jews were not so easily convinced by these words of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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...on the same level, 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?

Jesus then answers them with a statement that points to our Holy Eucharist. 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)

Jesus underlines how we must see his feeding of the 5,000 in the light of eternity and 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.

What we believe about the Lord Jesus Christ is of vital importance because God offers Him as our bread - not just for today, but for every day and for eternity.

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, and to enjoy today the pleasure of his presence.

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.



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.

That is our part id we seek first his kingdom, his righteousness. And actually, in the slipstream of that attitude of focusing on Him, He also gives us our daily bread. He helps us. He satisfies us today as well.

Conclusion

God stoops down to be with you in your own situation. To be with you, and me, in our problems, successes and failures, and joys and sadnesses.

Great 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 – not when you are perfect, not when you have reached a certain spiritual level, but just as your are.

And as the story of the feeding of the 5000 shows, sometimes God does really give us what we need in this life. He is a loving father. He meets us in our actual situation.

But, focus first on his Kingdom. Believe in God, and believe in Jesus. He is the bread of life. Whoever comes to him shall not hunger, and whoever believes in him shall never thirst.

+ Amen