

SERMON FOR 15<sup>th</sup> AUGUST - 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

by John Richardson

I read recently that with all the advances in medical science it will soon be possible for us to live to the age of 150. At the rate at which scientific discoveries are being made, then it will not be long before they tell us that we can live forever.

Well, I have news for them.

We've been there and done that.

2000 years ago Jesus gave us much the same promise when he described himself as the Bread of Life. "Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Chapter six of St John's Gospel is spread over five Sundays and this week we have reached week four. On no less than four of those Sundays Jesus tells us that he is the Bread of Life, and that whoever eats this bread will live forever.

Why does Jesus go to such lengths with this teaching? To say it once would have been enough. But he goes on and on about it, to such an extent that people simply cannot put upon with it any longer and turn away from following him. A lot of them reject his teaching. In next week's Gospel we hear: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?' Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

They rejected his teaching because it was unpalatable. No one likes the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood.

He must have meant something pretty important to use such language so that people rejected him and turned away.

Where do we begin with all this?

We need to go back to the beginning of chapter six, where we will find the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. There is a very strong message in that miracle: it tells us that Jesus feeds us.

What that means will become evident when we read the rest of chapter six where Jesus describes himself as "The Bread of Life."

This is the first of Jesus' sayings which all point us towards who Jesus is.

Five thousand people have seen the miracle. Their physical hunger has been satisfied. The miracle is a sign, pointing people towards the truth about Jesus and about themselves. But to see the sign is not enough. They must take the truth they have learned into their lives and make it their own. It must become the truth by which they live.

Although we were not actually there to witness the miracle, we take as truth the witness and testimony of those who were. So the same truth must become the truth which determines all that we do with our lives. So the Bread of Life becomes part of our lives - feeding us with the life of Christ himself - bringing us into contact with the living God and filling our lives with his Spirit.

One of the things I had to do when I was ordained priest was to consent to what is known as the thirty nine articles of religion. They are to be found in the Book of Common Prayer and they set out what the priest is asked to believe and do in his or her ministry. If ever you have a spare hour or two, it's worth reading them, although I can't promise that you will be suitably enlightened.

The best way I can describe the articles is to say that they are a sign. They signify a life-style, a way of life to which we are called. But they are meaningless unless the words are turned into action and become the truths by which we live.

The signs of Jesus are much the same. They signify truth. But unless the truth becomes the foundation on which we build our lives, it is meaningless.

In the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the people saw the result of God's love and care and concern for them through the words and works of Jesus. But that was not enough. The people must take that truth into their lives so that it becomes the truth by which they live.

Bread is not just a physical relief of hunger: it is a sign that through Jesus our spiritual hunger can be satisfied. The physical and the spiritual belong together. Only when they are held together is life possible.

For many people their physical existence is all that matters. They see no need for a spiritual dimension. But to consider our lives as a mere physical existence is not enough. That is not life.

For others, the spiritual dimension to life is all that matters. Yet to consider our lives as merely a spiritual entity without any physical expression is not life.

The two must be held together.

What we are doing here this morning is a sign.

It is a sign that Jesus is here present with us.

It is a sign that through the bread and the wine we receive the life of Christ. That life becomes part of our lives and enables us to live our lives as followers of Jesus.

Whatever we personally think is happening when we celebrate the Eucharist - and there is a variety of understandings - none of which is more theologically correct than the other ones - we would all agree that we are receiving the life of Christ.

Jesus is described as the Word of God. What that means is that in Jesus we see God as he has never been seen before. In the Eucharist this Word becomes part of our life enabling us to live Christ-like lives.

I read recently in the Church Times about a parish where they celebrated Christmas in July this year. The vicar thought it was a good idea and a way of cheering people up after all they had been through in the course of the pandemic. He said that Christmas wasn't just for December 25th - it should be celebrated every day of the year. Whilst I can understand why he said that, I'm not sure about celebrating Christmas Day in July.

Yet there is a sense in which we **should** celebrate Christmas every day. And that is to remind ourselves every day of some words from the Gospel of John which we hear on Christmas Day:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.”