

John 6:35, 41-51

³⁵ Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸ for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'

⁴¹ Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' ⁴² They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' ⁴³ Jesus answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. **5** ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Seeing, Believing, 'Eating' and Behaving

Today's gospel reading from John is in the middle of all that Jesus is saying after the feeding of the 5000 about himself being the Bread of Life. Chapter 6 of John's gospel which covers the feeding sign and all that Jesus says about it is broken into 5 parts which we hear over 5 Sundays. Some parts are missed out too so I put in the missing verses for today's reading so it made a bit more sense.

In this teaching Jesus is weaving together several themes and creates a dense theological description of who he is as the Bread of Life. He repeatedly speaks of bread, from heaven, descending, life and everlasting life, giving, seeing, believing, feeding, and eating and the argument circles around these concepts in a way that is very like the Jewish teaching of his day.

In this section he is particularly referring to seeing and believing: the people have seen the signs yet not understood and focused only on the basic everyday reality of eating actual bread. He goes on to explain that he comes from the Father and that those who are drawn to him by the Father will be raised on the last day. He finishes this section with the repeated affirmation that those who believe will have eternal life – and once again uses the metaphor of eating for believing and receiving.

How does this metaphor – this image – of Jesus being the bread of life – work? As we say in our communion liturgy – we feed on him in our hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving. Eating this bread means taking that food of life into ourselves totally. We are bringing Jesus – the living bread into ourselves so that we have his life within us. This is a whole new level of the saying – 'You are what you eat'.

So as we truly see what Jesus is really about, as we believe that and take his life into ourselves we will live his life. Our John reading today finishes

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Our Ephesians reading today concludes

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and **live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us**, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

If we have his life within us, that is, if we have truly seen and believed and 'eaten' of the living bread, then we will imitate God, live Christ's life of love.

The rest of our Ephesians passage gives us an indication of what living like this involves. It might be useful to have Ephesians 4 open in front of you. Let's think first of kindness.

Kindness is a virtue not often enough considered, though we were encouraged to do so during the height of the Covid pandemic. But kindness remains central to what Christianity is all about. The reason for this as we've already heard clearly at the end of this passage: kindness is one of the purest forms of the imitation of God. How would it be if God were the kind of god who was always making snide or bitter remarks at us? What would worship and prayer be like if we thought God had been talking about us behind our backs, putting us down to others? How would we feel if we thought we couldn't trust God to tell us the truth, if he was always losing his temper with us? Well: how do people feel about us if that's what we're like? Wouldn't it be better in every way to be like God?

Of course, there are plenty of religions, ancient and modern, where the gods do behave in that sort of way. But when we learn through looking at Jesus, the bread of life, who the true God is and what he's like, then we see the standard at which we are to aim. There are, alas, all too many Christians, and sometimes whole churches, that have allowed themselves to forget that kindness and mutual forgiveness are the very essence of Christian community. After all, if we are called to unity, as the letter of Paul to the Ephesians stresses repeatedly, it is

going to be far easier to obey the call if we are working hard at 'promoting kindness'.

This passage is chock-full of practical advice on how to do it, not least in giving warnings about how not to do it. As we read last week in Ephesians, living as a Christian demands that we grow up in our thinking: you have to learn to identify your own moods and behaviour patterns, to see which ones are going in the right direction and which ones in the wrong direction. You have to learn consciously to choose to follow the first and reject the second.

We are not supposed to go with the flow of whatever we happen to feel at the time. Some people think that, by doing that, they are being 'free', or are 'being themselves'; but that's usually an excuse for selfish behaviour and the lazy thought which sanctions it. Rather, we should regard our moods, and the speech which flows from them, as we might a strong but wilful horse, which needs to be reminded frequently of the direction we're supposed to be going in.

Paul highlights the importance of speaking the truth. He quotes in verse 25 from an Old Testament passage (Zechariah 8.16) which predicts that God is going to renew his people and restore their fortunes. Speaking the truth to each other is one of the ways in which this will be noticed. If we belong to one another in Christ, telling lies is a form of corporate self-deceit, and so is self-defeating.

So, too, anger must be dealt with appropriately. Paul, again quoting the Old Testament (Psalm 4.4), doesn't say you shouldn't be angry; anger itself is a natural human emotion, and to pretend it isn't there is a form of lying. But he insists that you mustn't let it lead you into sin. You must learn to tame it, to deal with it before you lie down to sleep. Otherwise you are leaving an open door and inviting the satan to come in. Everything that follows from anger – the raised voices, the shocking words, the sour taste in the room – all these must be put away (verse 31). It makes sense, doesn't it; would you rather live day by day with these or without them? But recognizing this and taking steps to bring it about – that's what really matters.

Paul adds some comments in the more positive direction. They seem almost casual, throw-away remarks, but they are very revealing. It isn't just that stealing is wrong. Rather, people who are used to petty thievery should say to themselves that they have a duty to help those in need, and they should work to make it possible (verse 28). It isn't just that bitter or sour speech is to be avoided. Your tongue gives you the opportunity to bring God's grace to people, by what you say and how you say it, and it's a shame to pass up this chance (verse 29).

In particular, you should behave as those on whom God's holy spirit has placed God's mark. The word Paul uses could refer to the 'seal' or official stamp on a document or package, marking it out for a particular use or occasion. The mark indicates who it belongs to and what it's for. The presence of the holy spirit in the community, and in the heart of the individual Christian, declares that we belong to God, and that we are destined for full 'redemption', that is, the liberation which will come on the day when God sets the whole world free and gives us our resurrection bodies. That is central to the Christian hope, and possessing this hope gives particular shape to our present lives.

People who are enslaved to anger and malice may think they are 'free' to 'be themselves', but they are in bondage. If we are marked out by the spirit's personal presence living in us, think how sad it makes that spirit, how it grieves the Holy Spirit, if we behave in ways which don't reflect the life and love of God.

Paul makes it really clear here some of the ways in which we are to live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. We need to ask ourselves – have we truly fed on the bread of life, have we taken the life of Christ into ourselves and shown that by living his life of love, by imitating God's character as we see in Christ Jesus?

Take a moment now to bring this before God, knowing that as we confess our sins, as we resolve to turn away from them, he is faithful and just and will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

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Let us renew our commitment to feed on the bread of life, to make Jesus the centre, the source of the way we live our lives.