

## **“I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE”**

*John 6:25-40*

What was the best thing *before* sliced bread? Jesus, I reckon – and the best things *since* sliced bread, too, for that matter. In fact, Jesus is better in such an amazing way that it is beyond our understanding and imagination, really. So he has to find some things to compare himself to – things that are everyday objects to his listeners, things that they can recognise and identify with. There are seven of them in John’s Gospel and we started to look at them a couple of weeks ago as Rick helped us reflect on the way in which Jesus used the simple phrase “I am” as a way of connecting his listeners with thoughts of God. Last week Jeremy talked about Jesus’ assertion that he is “*The way, the truth and the life*” and, with the help of some dog food (you’ll have to ask someone who was here) reminded us that the “I am”s of Jesus really provide us with all that we need for life (including, I think he said, a shiny coat and a wet nose).

This morning we’re going to consider the first of the “I am” sayings that Jesus is recorded as using, in the passage we read from *John 6*. We read just a part of that chapter, which is fairly long and we didn’t have time really to read it all, but we can’t fully get to grips with what Jesus is saying here if we don’t take into account what went immediately before it. And what follows it also has something to say to us as well, so you might like to have your Bibles open at the chapter so you can see where we’re going.

The chapter begins with the account of Jesus’ miraculously feeding the five thousand. It’s a story that most people are familiar with: a huge crowd gather to listen to Jesus and are so enthralled by his words that they stay well beyond their meal time. Jesus uses a young lad’s picnic of five bread rolls and a couple of fish to feed the whole crowd and the people obviously find that pretty impressive and want to see a bit more. The experience of free food may well have something to do with this, but we cannot overlook the comment that they make in *6:14*, where they say “*Surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world.*” For the Jews of the time there was a very strong idea that when the Messiah whom they were eagerly awaiting finally appeared, one of the signs that it was him would be that he would produce manna, bread from heaven. In many of the books that were written between the time of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus – none of which are to be found in our Bibles – there were a great many references to this sign.

If you know anything about the story of God’s people in the Old Testament, you will remember that Moses, when he was leading the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in their new homeland, seemed to provide a strange kind of food which the people called “*manna*” (which means “I don’t know”). The story is in *Exodus 16*, if you want to follow that up. The new Messiah would have many of Moses’ qualities and characteristics, so it was natural to assume that providing food from nowhere would be one of those. So, spurred on with this hope and with satisfied bellies, the people try to find out more. Jesus realises what is happening, of course, and sets off across the lake (on foot!) to prevent them “*making him king by force*” (*6:15*).

When the people do catch up with Jesus, a discussion begins. It seems fairly safe to assume that this begins by the lakeside, but it’s obvious that, by the end of this episode, they have moved to the synagogue (*6:59*). One of the first things they ask him for is another miraculous sign (*6:30*), which would authenticate for them Jesus’ identity as Messiah. Of course, they’ve just had a sign, but that was simply providing food for 5,000 people for one afternoon – Moses provided food for an entire nation for forty years! If Jesus really is Messiah, then he will at least have to equal that. And to back up their demand, they quote from the Old Testament, “*He gave them bread from heaven to eat*” (*6:31*). Now that’s not a single quotation, but seems to have been put together from ideas in three verses from their Scriptures, *Exodus 16:4*, *Nehemiah 9:15* and *Psalms 78:24,25*.

So Jesus takes the opportunity to expound that quotation to those who have stayed to listen. Don’t forget, Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher, and it wouldn’t seem at all unusual that he should sit down and preach to them. What follows is really a sermon by Jesus, with an introduction and three points, and he begins in a style typical of Jewish rabbis.

In 6:32,33 Jesus firstly corrects the wrong ideas that some of them have about this saying: he starts by telling them what it **doesn't** mean. It wasn't Moses who provided the manna for them: it was God. All their – and our – regular provision of food comes from God the Father, so there was nothing special about Moses' powers as far as that was concerned.

Secondly, God gives his people "*the true bread from heaven*". The manna was a means of meeting their material needs, but there is bread that is able to do far more than that, bread that really is heavenly. Jesus will go on to expand on this point later on, but he's saying that the bread in the desert, the manna, was really only a pointer towards that true bread.

Thirdly, this bread gives life not only to God's people now, in a material sense, but it "*gives life to the world*". The power of the true bread goes far beyond anything we can expect of ordinary bread – and even far beyond what the people came to expect of the miraculous bread in the desert.

So, having begun in that way, Jesus goes on to preach a three point sermon (you see, there is good biblical precedent for it!), in which he breaks up the sentence they've quoted to him and explains each of its bits.

### **1. HE GAVE THEM BREAD FROM HEAVEN (6:34-40)**

A good sermon always has an attention-grabbing first line – and Jesus certainly grabs their attention with this. "*I am the bread of life,*" says Jesus. He's not only the giver of this bread – he *is* the bread! The true bread that has come down from heaven is Jesus himself. And, as he has just pointed out, this bread gives life to the world. Jesus' listeners, like all human beings, are stuck very much in the material world and their conception of what this all meant was limited: for them, as for many of us, heaven was the sky and the manna did literally fall from the sky. But Jesus is going way beyond that idea: he has come from God, the Father has sent him into this world to be a means of life for all men and women.

And that life is also something beyond simply day to day survival. "*Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" The life that Jesus promises is a life of deep fulfilment and lasting satisfaction. He's been sent from heaven to open up this life. It is, as 6:40 makes clear, a life that stretches way outside the here and now. It is "*eternal life*" and those who have eaten of this bread, who have responded to Jesus, will be "*raised up on the last day*".

That point gives the Jews something to chew over (metaphorically speaking) and they begin to mumble amongst themselves that this is only the son of the joiner up the road. What right has he got to say such things? Usually today we're much more polite, aren't we? (I say, usually. There was a man in London who would stand up and shout rather rude comments if he didn't agree with me – or whoever was preaching.) We tend to wait until the service is over and then get into little huddles to moan about what the preacher has said, or the way he or she has said it. The Jews gave voice to their criticism, so Jesus is prompted into making his second point.

### **2. BREAD FROM HEAVEN TO EAT (6:41-51)**

What's the point of having bread you can't eat? (Unless it's the glazed loaf at the centre of some harvest festival displays, of course.) Why does Jesus use this picture of himself? Why refer to himself as an everyday carbohydrate-based foodstuff? It's hardly awe-inspiring, is it? Well, he's making the point that he is the *true* bread, the real means of life that the Father has sent down from heaven to be received by all men and women. Just as manna or our ordinary daily bread has to be received and consumed if it's to be of any use, so Jesus has to be received if he is to be of any use to us for eternal life. The Bible makes it clear that there is only one kind of bread that will provide this life: Jesus is the true bread. Forgive a bit of ethnic culinary stereotyping here, but it's not a question of the Hindus being papadums, the Muslims

being naan bread, the New Agers being some kind of wholemeal bloomer and the Christians being nice white sliced stuff: take your pick and eat your way to paradise! As Jeremy pointed out last week, Jesus is *the* Way to God – there is no other. Peter, who would have been with Jesus when he was saying these words, told the magistrates in Jerusalem that “*Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12).

Jesus is the true bread of life, the bread from heaven which we must, as it were, receive and digest. There’s a collect in the old *Book of Common Prayer* for Bible Sunday that asks God to help us “*read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*” the Word of God. More up to date is the song by the World Wide Message Tribe entitled “*Eat The Word*”. Basically, what we’re talking about here is that we have to believe what Jesus had to say about himself and his Father, to accept it as being true. Jesus backs up this point (in 6:45) with a quotation from *Isaiah 54:13*, which says “*They will all be taught by God*” and establishes a link between Jesus as the bread which we must accept and the way in which God teaches us all we need to know for eternal life.

As he concludes this point, Jesus begins to talk about eating his flesh (6:51) and that, understandably, causes his listeners to start mumbling again. It’s all starting to sound a bit barbaric to them – as it has done to people down through the centuries (people like the Roman governor Pliny). But far from explaining in simple terms, Jesus goes on in his third point to be even more offensive to the orthodox Jews in the synagogue.

### 3. TO EAT (6:52-58)

Not only does Jesus talk about eating his flesh, but he mentions drinking his blood. There would probably have been uproar in the synagogue at this point. The Law of Moses specifically forbids eating meat with the blood still in it, let alone drinking blood. And to drink human blood is beyond belief, even to us! What on earth can Jesus mean?

The key is in 6:56, I believe. What is required is not just an assimilation of the facts, a consent to the ideas of Jesus. That’s really just a kind of head knowledge that is sterile and, ultimately, meaningless. If that’s all you need for eternal life, then a GCSE in RE would get you into heaven (assuming you did the option which includes Christianity!). No – Jesus is saying that we need to fill our minds, our bodies, our whole beings with him. We are to be a part of him and he a part of us. It means a total commitment in which every part of our life is lived for Jesus, and Jesus is involved in all that we do.

It will probably not have escaped your notice that the words and ideas that Jesus uses here are very reminiscent of the words we use as part of our communion. That is our expression of what we believe about Jesus. John doesn’t include a detailed account of the Last Supper in his gospel, but this section here would certainly have reminded his first readers of that ritual as powerfully as the narrative accounts in the other three gospels.

As the true bread of life, Jesus is inviting us to become so committed to him, so full of him that it’s just like eating ordinary bread. As the bread we eat is digested it becomes part of our body and all the bits of protein, vitamins and other useful nutrients find their way into every part of our person. Jesus, as we commit ourselves to him, as we develop our relationship with him, as we learn from him, wants to be in every part of our lives, to be having an effect on all that we say and do and think.

But there’s one final episode in this chapter. In 6:60-70 John tells us of the reactions of those who heard this sermon. Some of them grumbled and thought it was all a bit hard to accept. We never hear of them again, so they probably eventually gave up. Some gave up and left there and then – real commitment to Jesus wasn’t for them. A few – including the twelve disciples – stuck with it. Peter summed up their

views when he told Jesus that, however difficult real commitment proved to be, there really wasn't any other choice: they would stick with Jesus.

Which group would you come into? Jesus wants to be the Bread of Life for you, but that demands a response of commitment. Will you grudgingly make a few half-hearted attempt, only to give up when the going gets tough? Will you maybe walk out of here this morning and never really get to grips with what Jesus has for you? Or will you say, "I know it might be tough, but Jesus is my only hope. I believe. I receive. I commit myself to him"? That's something to ponder as we turn to receive communion in a few moments time.

*Discussion notes on next page.*

## I AM

JESUS SAID: "I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE  
*John 6:35*

At this point in John's story of Jesus, Jesus has just miraculously fed 5,000 people (*John 6:1-15*) and they have begun to think that this is a sign of the coming Messiah (*6:14*). There was an idea current at the time that the Messiah would bring down bread from heaven. Jesus realises that the people think like this, but sees that they have a misguided impression of what kind of Messiah he is to be (*6:15*), so he crosses the lake to get away from them.

When the people catch up with him a discussion begins, probably starting by the lake but moving into the synagogue (*6:59*). The people ask for another sign so that Jesus can authenticate his apparent claim to be the Messiah by providing food permanently for them as Moses did with the manna in the desert (*6:31*). To back this up, they quote from the Old Testament. The quotation is a mixture of *Exodus 16:4*; *Nehemiah 9:15*; *Psalms 78:24,25*. Some scholars have suggested that this might well have been the lectionary reading in the synagogue on that day.

Jesus takes the opportunity to explain the verse that they have quoted and to point out their own misunderstandings. (This is basically a three point sermon by Jesus!) In a style that is typical of Jewish rabbis, he begins by putting right their wrong ideas (*6:33*):

- The bread from heaven was given **not** by Moses, but by God
- The bread in the desert was **not** the true bread
- The bread in the desert did **not** give true life for all people

He then goes on to make his three points.

### 1. **He gave them bread from heaven**

Jesus himself is the true bread and offers life to all people. It is a gift, not something to work for. Only he can provide deep fulfilment and lasting satisfaction (*6:35*).

### 2. **Bread from heaven to eat**

Jesus is the truth from heaven, to be received and taken into oneself, just as food is eaten and digested. The link between truth and understanding is made clearer by *6:45*.

### 3. **To eat**

What is required is not just believing ideas, but believing in Jesus and all that he did. Jesus talks of his "*flesh*" in a way that reminds us of the Last Supper (which John does not describe in his gospel), but we must be very careful not to say that communion is necessary for salvation.

Jesus is the Real Bread, giving real life to all who believe in him.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What do you think was really the crowd's concern when they followed Jesus?
2. When Jesus says "*I am the bread of life*" what does he mean by "*life*"?
3. The Jews' ideas about manna and the Messiah were very much bound up with their own cultural life and religious traditions. What cultural and traditional ideas can get in the way of *our* understanding of Jesus?
4. Does this episode mean that we shouldn't concern ourselves with providing for people's material needs?
5. How can we "*feed on Jesus*" today?

The story of the manna in the desert can be found in *Exodus 16*.