

Year B Proper 19 Being Hauled Into the Boat John 6: 35, 41-51 "I am the Bread of Life"

"I am the bread of life." Jesus says this several times throughout this short gospel passage. For us, this means he is everything we need – our spiritual nourishment, our gift of salvation, our path to eternal life, the way in which we participate in God, and so on. We have the advantage of living in a time in which this good news has been around for 2000 years. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus has already happened and we are living in a state of salvation. But, for Jesus' audience at the time, (the Pharisees in this case), hearing, "I am the bread of life" was all brand new; his words confused them; his claim to be their messiah was very difficult to accept because he wasn't the sort of messiah they were expecting; and so, as it turns out, this passage today is all about faith. Let's start there.

Faith today is a very over-used, misused word. We have "blind faith"; we are told to "take a leap of faith" – the way it's used implies that if you have faith, you don't have knowledge. If you have faith in something you don't really know that it is true.

But having faith doesn't mean that I have no knowledge base and because my faith can't be scientifically studied doesn't mean that my faith is groundless. What it does mean is that I have different grounds for my faith knowledge.

Christian faith refers to something that is received. God gives knowledge of Himself to us in the stories, events, and words of the Bible. He gives Himself to us in the world around us and in our own humanity. Jesus tells us today that God teaches us and we learn.

This teaching and learning, this revelation of God to us so that we may know God, can only be received by us if God the Holy Spirit helps us to understand. Paul talks about this a few times, especially in his letter to the Corinthians when he simply says that no one can say, “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. We hear Jesus today tell us, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.”

The gift of the Holy Spirit allows us to take in the knowledge of God that God is revealing to us. This is our faith – taking in the knowledge of God, taking it to heart and responding to it. Our faith means that we allow ourselves to be claimed by God, to trust God, and to commit ourselves to God in a way that not only shapes the way we look at the world around us but it is a faith that re-shapes us. Living in Christ and Christ living in us gradually transforms us – and therefore the world around us – when we allow ourselves to be drawn ever more deeply into relationship with God who is love. The word “believe” that we hear today when Jesus says, “Whoever believes in me has eternal life” is the Greek word *pisteuo*. It means belief in, faith in...but in the sense of being in a trusted relationship.

And so, faith in God through Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit is more than simply accepting certain things as true. Faith is about aligning ourselves with God, entering into a relationship with God – one that involves knowledge of, love for, and trust in God. Faith is life-changing. Faith is world-changing.

Let’s get back to the Pharisees Jesus was talking to in the gospel today. What was getting in the way of their faith in Jesus as “the bread of life”? Well, the Pharisees already had a well-established knowledge base about God, they had a

relationship with God, they knew what their messiah was supposed to be like – and Jesus didn't fit any of this. Just the day before this “bread of life” conversation, Jesus had had 5000 men hanging on his every word, they were so inspired they wanted to crown him as king. The *expected* messiah would have let them and would have started planning to overthrow the Roman invaders. That would have fit the Pharisees' frame of reference but Jesus didn't do anything remotely resembling their idea of the messiah. Jesus fed what could have willingly become his army and then he sent them home.

To make things worse for Jesus, the Pharisees figured that Jesus couldn't possibly be the messiah because they knew his mum and dad. There is the saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Well, the Pharisees had a little bit of knowledge about Jesus and were familiar with him and his family so they figured they knew all they needed to know. He wasn't from heaven. He was from Nazareth.

Jesus tried to help them out by making the connection with something else they did know and understand – the Exodus out of slavery in Egypt – the pivotal event in their history. Jesus had them recall that God had fed their ancestors each morning with manna – bread from heaven – while they travelled in the desert. He told them God had fed them temporarily with perishable bread but now here he was, the living bread that would nourish them with eternal life. They would never need any other bread from heaven ever again.

But the Pharisees remained conflicted on the inside. They were struggling. Jesus was adding new information to their frame of reference, asking them to think differently, act differently – he was pushing them out of their comfort zone.

That's what faith does. Faith – our relationship with God – is not an easy road. Faith needs us to do things we don't want to do, associate with people we wouldn't normally associate with. The first time I was in London to meet Jay's family, we came across a homeless man asking for money. It was 38 degrees in downtown London that afternoon and this man was scruffy, dirty, sweaty, and smelly. His clothes looked like they hadn't seen the inside of a washing machine for a very long time and he was wearing everything he owned, including a winter coat, on this sweltering day. Why? Because he did not have a home – let alone a closet – in which to hang that coat. If he didn't have it on his back then somebody would be trying to take it from him. He made me uncomfortable. The smell made me want to keep my distance and just the fact that he was clearly a homeless person made me want to keep my distance but I gave him money and I chatted with him for a while. Faith prompted me to do something that pushed me out of my comfort zone because faith in God means being filled with the love of God, becoming the love of God, until there is nothing else. Faith is life-changing. Faith is world-changing.

Sometimes things happen that cause you to doubt your faith. When my brother died, my parents had an extremely difficult time. I remember my mum reading books like "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". She was angry with God, she questioned God, she struggled with a God who had let that happen but in the end, her faith brought her through it and she actually became stronger because of it. She had wrestled and struggled with her faith, and now she better understood her faith – her relationship with God was clearer, deeper, and she allowed God's love to fill her, replacing anger, hate, bitterness.

Faith is not easy. Modelling our lives after Jesus is not easy and it is normal to give in to the temptation to rely on ourselves rather than on God. Remember, Jesus tells us we must be *drawn* into our faith by God. The word Jesus uses – “drawn” – is the same word used later by John to mean, “*hauled* into the boat.” This certainly adds a new perspective to Jesus telling us he will make us fishers of people! We are dragged into our faith by God. Even the Israelites who were being led through the desert by God – a cloudy pillar by day, a fiery pillar by night – had trouble trusting God. God was right there with them and they still doubted him. God told them to only gather as much manna as they needed for the day for their family and NOT to gather extra. Of course, some of them went ahead and gathered extra anyway and the next morning they woke up to find that extra manna had gone rotten and wormy. The point was that God wanted them to trust him, to rely on him each day – to be in a trusted relationship with him. Despite the lesson learned, I’d like to bet that at least some of those Israelites tried gathering extra manna for a second time, just to see...

No, faith is not easy and faith is not comfortable. If we are feeling comfortable and have the niggling thought that there’s something we should be doing, we are probably right. Faith, and coming to church, is not simply about being refreshed and nourished. We are gathered by the Holy Spirit and we come to encounter God, we come to be changed by that encounter, we come to be hauled into the boat. We all need to work at discerning the particular things that God is calling us to do. Sometimes we know what God is calling us to do and we try to ignore Him or avoid it. Faith is life-changing. Faith is world-changing; and that is never comfortable.

The really good news is that the relationship established by faith goes two ways. Through all of our bumps and struggles, our discomfort and our questions and doubts, God's love never waivers. He is there to pick us up and dust us off, to carry us when we let him – and he is there, always, to haul us into the boat.

It is a boat that we are all in together. And what else do we do when we find ourselves in this boat but break out our fishing nets.