

Year B Proper 19 2024 Bread of Life & Eternal Life John 6 vv35 and 41 to 51

I am the bread of life. We hear this verse again today to remind us of where we left off in the conversation last week. We then skip a few verses and next hear that the Jewish leaders are grumbling about what Jesus is saying to them. It's important to notice that John has switched from talking to "the crowd" to talking to their leaders. It is the people in power who push back against what Jesus is saying. So, what is Jesus saying that has them so irritated?

Those verses we skip over actually help us in understanding what the Jewish leaders are grumbling about. In those verses, Jesus tells them that they are deliberately closing their eyes to the truth standing in front of them. They are refusing to believe that Jesus is from God. He tells them he has come from heaven to do the will of his Father who has sent him. And then he spells out the "will of his Father" is: "all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." All who see the Son and believe in him.

The leaders then open their mouths and confirm what Jesus has said about them – they see him, they've seen the miracles he has done, yet they are choosing not to believe in him. They are angrily grumbling: We know his parents. How can he say he's the bread come down from heaven? He's not from heaven. He's from Nazareth. Let's be clear, though. Jesus has said to the crowd, "I am the bread of life" and "I have come down from heaven." It is the leaders who then get those two things mixed up into one to grumble that Jesus has said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." But that mix-up really sums up what the big issue is: providing bread from heaven is what God does for them. Those verses that are left out today make it very clear to the leaders that Jesus is telling them something

they don't want to hear. Those who believe in me will have eternal life. Those who believe in me I will raise up on the last day. God gives eternal life. God bodily resurrects people on the Day of the Lord. Jesus is making it as plain as day. He is saying that he can and will do what the leaders believe only God could and should do. This is not sitting well with the Jewish leaders.

They are, as we spoke about last week, putting limits on who God is and what God does. The whole "Day of the Lord", "Redemption of Israel" isn't unfolding the way they always thought it would and so they are dismissing what is happening, closing their eyes to the signs they are seeing. Let's just dive into this "Day of the Lord" idea for a moment because it brings the enormity of Jesus' words into perspective for us. The Jewish people had been chosen by God "to address and deal with the problems within his creation" (N.T Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 35). "Israel was not just to be an 'example' of a nation under God; Israel was to be the means through which the world would be saved (35). In addition, this saving of the world would be accomplished when events in Israel reached a climax, when God would step in and save Israel from its enemies and "would at last bring his love and justice, his mercy and truth, to bear upon the whole world, bringing renewal and healing to all creation" (35). This time of absolute triumph of God and God's ways throughout the world was called "The Day of the Lord". The widely held belief – though not by the Sadducees – was that on that day, the dead prophets and all God's children would be bodily resurrected, never to die again. It is to this triumph and bodily resurrection that Jesus refers when he says "and I will raise them up on the last day."

Jesus was speaking to people eagerly awaiting the Day of the Lord. They are, and have been for centuries, under the oppressive rule of foreigners – dealing with

high taxes, strange laws, unfair treatment and brutality but the worst of it, the worst was that their oppressors didn't even believe in their God. They were pagans. They were trampling God's chosen people and this had been the case for 100's of years – since the Babylonian empire had destroyed Jerusalem and taken the Jewish people to their foreign land as slaves. Now a large chunk of those Jewish exiles had returned from their *place* of exile and yet, somehow, their exile continued. Here they were, still living that “centuries-old drama, still waiting for the turn in the story that would bring them out on top at last” (36). And here was Jesus, telling them that God's kingdom was at hand, “God was now unveiling his age-old plan, bringing his sovereignty to bear on Israel and the world as he had always intended, bringing justice and mercy to Israel and the world” (37). And he was doing it through him – Jesus. Jesus was the one to finally bring an end to their exile, he was leading the new exodus into relationship with God in God's kingdom. It is no coincidence that John is filling our ears with Exodus language – with Moses and manna, with grumbling and with God's provision of food for the multitudes.

But that can't be, the leaders say. That just can't be – he's from Nazareth. And Jesus says to them: you have *seen* me and yet do not believe. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness who grumbled against God and against Moses – they had witnessed God's saving acts of rescue, of water, of meat, of manna and yet they did not fully trust in God. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, the leaders grumble against Jesus although they have seen his signs of the presence of God's kingdom – the healing of sick, the casting out of demons, the feeding of thousands and yet they did not trust what they were seeing. They did not trust the saving power of God to fully meet their needs in that moment, to lead them into the end of their exile. How many of us have ears that don't hear and eyes that don't see?

How many of us see and don't believe because it's not what we expected, it's not what we wanted, it's not what we asked for? How many of us do not trust the saving power of God to fully meet our needs in every moment, to lead us into the end of our exile?

Jesus didn't give up on those Jewish leaders and he doesn't give up on us. In the face of our grumbling Jesus tells us to be quiet and listen as he explains. God the Father pulls people toward Jesus. God teaches, he tells us...through the prophets, it's written in the scriptures he says. Those who learn from God come to Jesus. Those who learn from God. Jesus is inviting people to join him in the kingdom but it is only those who learn from God who are actually accepting the invitation. So what are they learning and how are they learning it?

Again we return to Moses leading God's people in the first great Exodus. The Israelites wandered about in the wilderness for 40 years eating manna and learning God's ways. The manna was the food they needed to survive and it was food that could only be provided by God and had to be gathered according to God's instructions. As they ate the manna, day after day, they learned God's wisdom. For 40 years they learned as God tried to untangle their hearts and minds from the ways of empire – from the materialism, from the consumerism, from the social and economic hierarchies. They were being formed into a counter-cultural community – a society of equality, sharing of resources, of compassion. They ate the bread, their physical nourishment provided by God and they learned how to be God's people living in God's kingdom.

We know very well that the Israelites could not maintain their counter-cultural community. They cried out for a human king to be like all the other nations and

they slipped back into the ways of empire and all of the greed and injustice and poverty and oppression that comes along with it. If those ways of empire sound familiar, they should. We, too, have slipped back into the ways of empire and all of the greed and injustice and poverty and oppression that comes along with it. Walter Brueggemann tells us that the characteristic neighbourly practices of the Christian life, such as generosity, compassion, and forgiveness, are profoundly counter-cultural in a society, he says bluntly, “in a society that is deeply lacking in the elemental ingredients of common humanness” (Brueggemann, *The Word that Re-Describes the World*, 108).

But today, today, Jesus speaks words of hope. Today Jesus rekindles the deep, revolutionary hope of Israel, the hope that just as God has overturned the Pharaoh of Egypt, so too “will [God] overturn every unjust social arrangement and displace it with a new arrangement that will conform to [God’s] intention for creation” (Brueggemann, 132). And all we have to do is believe. Believe in the one whom God sent, Jesus tells us. Believe that I AM the one who will do this. I am the bread that gives life to the world and all who believe this have eternal life.

They have it. We have it. John 6:47: “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes *has* eternal life.” Eternal life is not living forever in the fullness of God’s kingdom at some point in the future. Eternal – (ahee-o-nee-os) from aion, is the quality of a particular age, and so believers live in “*eternal* ([166](#) /*aiónios*) life” right *now*, experiencing this *quality of God’s life* now as a *present possession* (Biblehub.com). Come to me and have eternal life, Jesus says. Just as God gave life to the Israelites in the wilderness with physical bread, Jesus gives us life that sustains us. The belief that he can and will overturn the world to bring all creation back into right relationship with God and each other, that belief fuels the passionate hope that

brings deep joy in spite of the current brokenness. Just as the Israelites ate and learned for 40 years, we come together each week to feast on Word and sacrament and to learn...we learn how to be that countercultural community intended by God from the beginning. Our worship together is our classroom, our training ground, our gymnasium where we learn and experience and practice life in the fullness of God's kingdom.

This is not an easy task – to learn how to live according to God's ways, to untangle from empire, to be God's countercultural community. It took the Israelites 40 years of daily struggle before they were finally ready to enter the Promised Land. It's not easy and some will be like the leaders today who could not accept the radical new reality of how God was accomplishing his purpose through Jesus. This isn't what I learned in Sunday School, some will say. This isn't what I signed on for – this fight to change the world. I thought Christianity was all about having personal faith, simply believing in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and being a good person.

But those who accept it, those who believe, you'll know who you are. You'll be the ones filled with deep joy even through painful times. You'll be the ones holding onto the sure and certain hope of the coming fullness of God's kingdom despite the evidence in the world to the contrary. Nourished and sustained with the Bread of Life, you'll be the ones hastening the kingdom with every act of abundant generosity, radical welcome, and fearless compassion.

Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes *has* eternal life. Let's be *those* ones.