

**Mattins Sermon Sunday 15 September 2019**  
**John 6 v 51 & v 60 – 69**

When I was bringing up our 3 children, I went through what I call my, earth mother Laura Ashley phase. I made my own chintz curtains, matching cushions, lavender potpourri, jams and I even attempted baking bread.

As my children grew up, I was delighted when their friends from our church youth group joined us for Sunday lunch. I served them a good home cooked roast with all the trimmings which they devoured as we gathered round the table putting the world and the church to rights.

My children still occasionally turn up on Sundays for Mum's home cooking. Although due to time constraints I can't always serve the customary roast and we have taken a liking for those delicious fashionable artisan breads from farmers markets served with a buffet.

But artisan breads aren't a recent innovation they were baked in abundance in ancient Greece where a collegium of bakers known to be quite competitive produced over 70 local varieties.

I mention all of this because gathering people round a table for Sunday lunch, eating bread, and putting the world and the church to rights, for me, resonates not only with the events in John chapter 6 but also the service of the Eucharist.

Bread has always been a staple food for sustaining life and also used extensively in religious ritual especially in the time of Christ. Jesus was born in Bethlehem otherwise known as the House of Bread. It's no small wonder then in John 6 verse 51 Jesus declares:

'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.'

But sadly, this statement causes much consternation among Jesus' multitude of followers. What does he mean by this?

To put this event into context it takes place just after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus had reached the zenith of his popularity. In fact, the crowds wanted to take him, by force if necessary and make him their King.

So how does the crowd respond to Jesus' free offer of eternal life and nourishment? They argue, they complain and finally in verse 66 they desert him. They just didn't get it.

Perhaps we should be a little suspicious of the crowd. Why are they following Jesus so obsessively in the first place?

Were they simply looking for a free meal? Because in ancient Rome a welfare system was developed called Bread for Peace or Bread and Circuses. The government gave away free grain to the poor to make bread. And in order to distract them from rioting they provided entertainment by hosting magnificent games.

But this didn't satisfy the crowd long-term. Some were hoping for a saviour who would solve their economic crisis, who could pull finance and food out of the air and for them Jesus was the latest meal ticket.

Of course, Jesus was fully aware of their motives. Earlier in this chapter he states: 'You are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill'. And he admonishes them: 'Don't work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you'.

Then there were those who wanted the easy option: "What must we do - to do the works God requires?" They wanted a quick fix formula to live by, drawn up by a leader who would think for them, who would tell them what to do - a no-brainer.

Others were miracle seekers, they wanted yet another spiritual spectacle. The previous day Jesus had fed over 5,000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves. But yesterday's miracle wasn't enough to last even until breakfast. They wanted more, they craved sensationalism but not commitment.

So, when Jesus addresses them by stating: 'I am the bread of life. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.' The multitude disperse because they are only interested in the temporal, the here and now, not the eternal.

Thus, Jesus is left with just the 12, verse 66 states: From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Even some of His so-called closest disciples had abandoned him. Why? Because they wanted Jesus to fit in with their own personal agenda.

Jesus turned to the remnant of 12 and asked: 'Are you going to leave also?' But Peter replied, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy one of God.'

To return to our question – what did Jesus mean by I am the bread of life?

When my husband and I first started to attend this Cathedral in 2004 we had little experience of Eucharist services. But a very helpful Canon took us under his wing and met up with us weekly over a period of months to explain. He told us we needed feeding. Coming from an evangelical tradition we of course assumed Bible study but that wasn't what he had in mind, although that's a vital aspect to pursue.

He said we need to feed on Christ. And he explained his experience of the Eucharist to us. When we gather round the Lord's table, as the body of Christ, the bread is blessed, then broken just as Christ's body was broken and his blood shed for us. As we receive the real presence of Christ in the sacraments of bread and wine, we are blessed, nourished and strengthened to go out and give ourselves over in the service of Christ to bless others. Then having been blessed, nourished and broken ourselves in the service of Christ, we return to the sacrament to feed on Christ again, to be blessed, nourished and sent out to give ourselves over to bless others in the name of Christ.

Such is the mystery of faith, of Christ's body and of his great sacrifice once and for all.