

**The bread of life**

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11; John 6:25-35*

Jean Vanier, who died earlier this year, was a Canadian Catholic philosopher, theologian and humanitarian. In 1964 he founded L'Arche, an international federation of communities spread over thirty-seven countries, which provided accommodation for and worked with people with developmental disabilities and those who cared for them. His book, *'Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John'* is not simply a commentary on that gospel, it has provided me over the years with different insights into this rich collection of teachings and sayings and wisdom from Jesus and the first community of Christians who followed Him.

Vanier writes about this wonderful passage from John's Gospel:

*Our lives are a journey from the weakness of the new-born child we once were to the weakness of the old person we will become. Our lives are a journey of growth from ignorance to wisdom, from selfishness to self-giving, from fear to trust, from guilt feelings to inner liberation, from lack of self-esteem to self-acceptance. We human beings do not **possess** life. We **receive** life in our fragile bodies. And this life grows, develops and deepens as long as we are nourished. Without food, we wither and die. What is true of our physical life is also true of our life in the Spirit. We need to be nourished. We need physical nourishment, intellectual nourishment and nourishment of the heart...Jesus came to give us special food so that we may attain fullness of life.'*

At this point in Jesus' ministry it was a good time, still filled with hope and possibility. People were excited and enthusiastic about Him, they flocked after Him to listen to Him and to wonder about Him. They followed Him, eating and drinking in His words. They were tired and hungry, and through the miracle of sharing, loaves and fishes were blessed and people learned to share what they had with each other so that thousands were fed. What a wonderful time, what a little taste of heaven.

The story preceding what we heard this morning isn't simply about a miraculous providing of food, or the miraculous desire that people had to share what they had brought with them with those around them. It is a story about caring and well-being.

*“Jesus reveals a caring God, a God Who is concerned for our well-being and wants us to be well, a God Who wants us to be concerned about our own welfare. Do we eat well? Rest well? Nourish ourselves well? It is not just a miracle of multiplying food but also of creating and building a caring community where people are concerned for one another.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Physical hunger is one thing, and a real thing, in many parts of the world where crops have failed, floods have come, and there isn't enough money to go round. In a few weeks time we celebrate Harvest, and we will do so by providing gifts from the list in our intimations, to a food bank barely two miles from this building. And we may want to ask why in a country like ours are food banks necessary for many decent people who no matter how hard they work simply cannot make ends meet. The squeezed middle, a former Prime Minister once said.

But this passage from John's Gospel points not only to physical hunger but also to other hungers in the world today. Jesus talks not only about food and nourishment for the body. He is talking about bread for the hearts and minds.

What Jesus says to us, recorded in the Bible, is the revelation of God's love for God's people. It is the revelation of what humanity is about, and what our lives are about, what our hopes are about. The bread that Jesus offers not only feeds our bodies, it feeds our hearts and minds and souls.

We not only need practical wisdom about how to live our lives, but we need intelligence seeking understanding of the meaning of the universe. We need to be nourished by the Word of God.<sup>iii</sup>

We need to listen to what Jesus says about God, and says about the kind of world God wants us to shape and create and sustain. Jesus says that we do not do this alone, for He will be with us, and there will be people around us who will, at different times and in different ways. He will help us as we help them.

I was at a meeting at 121 George Street last week, the Church of Scotland Headquarters. My small group was beginning to wrestle with a task given us by the General Assembly last May. We are to try and work out, by 2021, what is the point of Presbyterianism and how effective is it in mission? If you've got any ideas, jot them down on a postcard and pass them to me! Effectively we are trying to answer the question, 'What is the point of the Church?' What should be the 'blue-sky vision' for the local congregation, for the Presbytery and for the General Assembly? What *is* working, and why; and what *isn't* working, and why?

Four ministers round a table, having an existential crisis about the church. The thing that stopped us in our tracks was when one said, "In all we've talked about, I'm left wondering if we're not supposed to go back and wonder again at what Jesus was doing." Well, quite. What we see Jesus doing time and time again is talking to people, helping people, shocking people, challenging people, caring for people, befriending people, feeding people, loving people. Literally and metaphorically.

What we see Jesus doing is taking the old time religion of His day and asking questions of it. Was it still doing what it was supposed to be doing: bringing people closer to God, and closer to helping each other because of God.

Jesus, the overlooked presence in too many churches and their services and busy-ness, standing quietly, with His outstretched hands, saying persistently, "I am the bread of life." I am the One Who has what you need to keep going. I am the One Who can nourish you and feed you. I am the One Who can keep you honest. I am the One Who continues to be the awkward question that won't go away until it is answered.

This service today, have we who have gathered to worship, let alone prepared the worship, spent as much time as we ought thinking about how what we do is to praise our God in the Name of Jesus? This Church, and all the building work next door, and all the incredible activities and kindness and hospitality and outreach to the community, and help for the physically hungry and naked and lost and overlooked, do we remember often enough that what we are doing is to serve God in the Name of Jesus? To remember that we won't be able to do anything, or sustain

anything, until we remember the One standing in the midst with His outstretched hands saying, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty.”

Just like the ancient Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, searching for the Promised Land of milk and honey that would be their home, it wasn't just the physical place, the land, the hills and rivers. It was the fact that the source of the nurture and nourishment, the living God Who had provided the manna, the bread of heaven, was going to continue with them and be with them and stay with them and bless them. And when they forgot, remind them that this living God was still in their midst, asking, questioning, challenging, blessing, until in the person of Jesus He stood there once again in their midst and said to them, “I am the bread of life.” I will feed You with ideas and hope, and encouragement, and healing, and inspiration, and perseverance, and second chances, and new beginnings, and sudden remembering, and a love that goes on and on and never fades but always changes and becomes new each time it is recalled.

What do you hunger for today? Justice for the poor; integrity in public life; an end to homelessness; a serious thinking about the stewardship of the earth's resources; forgiveness for some failing; new energy after weariness; a clear vision of what do next; love? Help is at hand. Nourishment is at hand. Will You accept what He offers. “I am the bread of life.” Let Jesus feed You, then follow His example, and feed others.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Jean Vanier, Drawn Into The Mystery of Jesus, pps116-117

<sup>ii</sup> ibid p119

<sup>iii</sup> ibid p125