

Sermon Sunday 4 August 2024 Jesus the bread of life

1 Corinthians 13:1-7 John 6:29-35

This exchange between Jesus and the people in which Jesus makes the statement, the claim that he is the bread of life, takes place the day after the feeding of the five thousand. As we well know, that miracle involved, as well as two fish, five loaves of bread, and so there is a direct link here. And in fact, Jesus is taking the message behind the feeding of the five thousand and building on it. He is actually affirming that message.

So firstly, what is the message behind the feeding of the five thousand? The message quite simply is that Jesus can nourish us. He can feed us spiritually and emotionally, and there is more than enough to go around. So here he is aligning bread with the loaves and fishes as manifested in that miracle. It is undoubtedly a brilliant analogy because it is so simple and straightforward, and yet contains profound meaning. I guess that is the mark of all the analogies and stories Jesus uses to teach.

How important bread is to us. From the slice of toast at breakfast, to the sandwich at lunch, to the snack for the kids after school, to the range of delicious breads accompanying our dinner. Where would we be without bread?

We all have a hunger. Yes, we have a hunger for food as embodied in the loaf of bread, but we have a hunger for something far more meaningful than bread actually, and this is where Jesus is coming from. We have a hunger for love. William Blake wrote, *'Where love is concerned, our hearts are a bottomless gorge.'* How so very true. We have a need to be respected, valued and affirmed – that is what love is really about, and that is what makes us feel good about ourselves and about life. That's what gives us our feeling of self-worth and without that we are unable to function to our full potential.

I refer you to the last verse in that very well-known passage we heard from Paul's First letter to the Corinthians: *'If I do not have love, I am nothing.'* I don't think that could be put more plainly. If every single young person received full and unconditional love, crime statistics would take a big hit. If every single young person received full and unconditional love, we wouldn't necessarily solve the issue of mental health but we would certainly make significant inroads. There is no question that with the expression of love in our lives, we are able to express our potential, to not only ride out the storms of life but also to show our true worth.

So, what has this got to do with Jesus? When we take Jesus on board in our lives, we take on board everything he stands for – his example, his lessons, his values. We attempt to imbue our lives with all that is good, with all that is right and proper, with all the elements of love. Because that is what he stands for and that is what he challenges us to do. *'I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you.'* John 15:12.

The beauty of these two directives is that one leads to the other. Through faith in God we receive the strength, the motivation and the ability to reach out in love to one another. How do we do this?

Yes, we reach out to others. We respect, value and affirm one another. Simple? In theory, yes, but actually not that easy to do, not consistently. That is why we need God's assistance in enabling us to put this into practice. There are times when we certainly do need that strength and motivation to carry out this love.

And what are the implications? The benefits are actually substantial. The more this can be put into practice, the greater the flow-on effects for everyone. The more we are being loved, the better we will feel. The

more we are able to convey love to others, the better we feel ourselves. It's a message you have heard from me before and I make no apologies for that whatsoever.

There are innumerable ways we can convey love. We have talked about giving our time, about listening. Let me touch on another, and as I do, just to remind ourselves that love in the Christian sense is about a feeling of care, respect and affirmation. Praise. How often each day do we praise or compliment? I suspect not enough. For many of us, it is something which we probably need to work at. Now, one of the great things about praise is that you actually impact on more people than you realise. Let me tell you a story to illustrate.

Some years ago, Norman Vincent Peale wrote a wonderful book, called 'The Power of Positive Thinking.' He relates a certain experience he had. He was travelling with a friend in a taxi in a busy city in America. When they reached their destination, his friend paid the taxi driver and then said to him, 'Thank you so very much. I thought the way you handled the busy traffic was magnificent. You really do a wonderful job. You have a tremendous day.'

As they walked away, Peale said to his friend, 'That was very interesting. You certainly would have made his day.' His friend replied, 'I am sure you are right, but I think I have probably made a difference in the day of at least several hundred people! You see, that taxi driver will go away feeling good about life, about himself, and that is going to reflect in the way he communicates and relates to his customers for the rest of the day. Assuming he has about 30 rides, those 30 people, because of the positive way he will no doubt relate to them, will in turn go away feeling good about life and will pass that on to all those they come in contact with. In no time at all, that goodwill has spread to many people.'

When someone praises us, compliments us, we feel good. A compliment can sustain us for days. So, let's do it for others, regularly. '*Let your conversation be gracious and effective.*' Colossians 4:4. Leo Buscaglia, author and motivational speaker, said, '*Too often we underestimate the power of a smile, a kind word, an honest compliment.*' I give you a challenge, and the challenge is this: to make a commitment every morning to praise three people during the day. I know you will feel good about yourself in doing that and the person you praise will feel really good, but we can only guess at how many other people you might have impacted upon.

This is precisely what Jesus means when he tells us to love our neighbour. Our neighbour is anyone with whom we come into contact, and the love he is talking about is simply caring for, valuing and affirming one another. Jesus is the bread of life because he brings us the recipe and the power for making each other feel good, to feel nourished and fulfilled.

Rev Warner Wilder