
and a fascinating community, but to be honest we really struggled with the food. We had to help prepare it, and it was tough, highly spiced Indian vegetables in a watery stew, with a handful of rice. It was the food of the poor rural population in which this community was set. But for us with our Western background we struggled to get it down, and it really didn't feel very nourishing at all, while feeling guilty that we were struggling with what most of those around us had to have all the time.

But we had one treat. On our way to the community we had bought a loaf of sliced white bread. Each evening before we went to bed we treated ourselves a slice each. It had no butter or spread but it felt the most luxurious and sustaining piece of food we could ever remember.

When I read of Jesus calling himself the bread of life, I am often reminded of that experience. The discovery to what an extent in Jesus' culture bread was a special, sustaining food. But this year it speaks in a different way.

At that community all our favourite food had was not available to us, and so we came to rely on our daily slice of bread for sustenance and pleasure. We learnt to value bread in a new way.

During the pandemic much that gives us joy and pleasure has not been available to us, and perhaps that has given us an opportunity to value what really matters. In the wonderful spring we had last year, during the first lockdown, many came to a greater awareness of the beauty and joy of the natural world around us.

When the dreadful events around the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May last year went round the world, many were able to focus in a new way on the injustices of racism, and to

join together to proclaim Black Lives Matter.

Also, we have recognised what really matters in the things we have been deprived of, relationships have become more important than ever. Last week, I had the privilege of meeting up with old friends to sing in Southwell Cathedral. We weren't sure we were able to go ahead until a few days before when the restrictions were lifted, and we had to work out how to do things as safely as we could. But the joy of meeting up with old friends, having long conversations about trivial matters, catching up with what we had all been up to, was such a joy.

With so much stripped away, can we focus on what really sustains us? The promise of the gospel is that it is Jesus. Jesus the bread of life, offering us sustenance, helping us see things differently, giving a different set of priorities from the world around us.

Jesus says to those who followed him over the lake after the feeding of the five thousand: 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.'

Following Jesus, we discover in him the food that endures for eternal life. We discover something new and wonderful. We discover, healthy relationships of love that build life-giving community, real care, and true justice. We may not get answers to the hard questions about why the pandemic happens and where God is in it. But in that discovery of Jesus, of his way of living, of his way of being, we will find deep in our hearts that he is the bread of life who points us to what really matters and sustains us and that this is the path through all the challenges of the world to life in all its fullness.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

Service for August 1st, 2021



Jesus the Bread of Life

Call to worship:

Lord God, giver of life,
you bless us with all we need –
and with so much more.
Keep us from being so focused on physical needs
that we neglect our spiritual food.
Feed us with your word,
satisfy us with your presence,
and strengthen us by your Spirit –
that we may share your eternal life.
Amen.

Hymn:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds (StF 322)

Prayer of Adoration

Merciful God,
we thank you that you are to be trusted,
that you are faithful and provide for all our needs.
When we feel alone in the desert,
that is where we meet you.
In the wilderness of our lives,
we can turn to you and know that you will sustain
us.
We worship you,
and we thank you that in you there is always
hope.
Amen.

Psalm 51: (StF 811)

Read the psalm, and then reflect on its meaning
for you as you listen to the setting of the words (in
Latin), but the composer Allegri.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3v9unphfi0>

Reading: Exodus 16: 2 - 4, 9 - 15

Hymn: Take this moment,(StF 513)

Reading: John 6: 24 - 35

Sermon

At a social gathering last week, someone was asking me how things had been for the church during the pandemic. I talked about online worship, about the challenges that churches are facing, and the ongoing uncertainty. But he went on: 'But what do you think the pandemic has done for people's faith?' I wonder how you would answer that question? At our Synod, Kerry Scarlett our Learning Network officer asked us what word most described our relationship with God in the past week, and the two most used words were 'close' and 'distant.'

In my answer to my friend I talked about how for me different parts of the Bible had come alive in a new way, the Psalms of Lament, the prophets writing when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, and passages like the one we used as our Old Testament reading from the story of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness.

For the uncertainty that so many feel at the moment, which may go with a sense that God is distant, a sense of being abandoned by God, is a recurring theme throughout the Bible.

We sometimes use religion to help us create a safe space in an uncertain world. But the realisation that church was not a safe space, that activities around worship, like receiving the sacrament and singing together were not allowed, deprived many of us of things that helped create that sense of safety in God's presence.

Allied to this are the deeper theological questions. If God is truly a God who loves and cares, how can the pandemic have been allowed to happen. Why didn't God put a stop to it? Is God in control?

The people of Israel in the desert asked similar questions. They were so desperate in their hunger that they cried out: 'If only we had died in Egypt.'

Of course this story has a happy ending. God promises Moses he will provide food for the people and in a miraculous way they are fed.

We are still in the middle of the pandemic, at least from a global perspective. Will the vaccine prove the life saving manna that gives hope for the future? The signs are good, certainly from where we sit in the west, but it will only offer true hope if it is shared around the world with those who do not have the resources and health care that we take for granted in this country.

But even if the pandemic is tamed, we will continue to face major challenges as a human race particularly around global warming. Any religion that paints God as a power that will easily sort out the uncertainties and anxieties of our future is in danger of simplistic wishful thinking.

Some might at this point say that these challenges show that any religious faith is simply a human invention to try and unsuccessfully make sense of an alien world.

Indeed in some ways I would be surprised if most of us have not had some moments over the last eighteen months when we have felt like that.

And yet, for all the real questions, there is an alternative narrative. A narrative that to me relates to the words of Jesus at the end of his explanation of the feeding of the five thousand in our gospel passage. 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

Many years ago, Barbara, my wife, and I went to India and we went to visit a Christian monastic community in Trichi by the great River Cauvery in Tamil Nadu. It was a beautiful place,

Hymn: Jesu, the joy of loving hearts (StF 365)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Thank you, Lord, that we can trust you in all things.
Even when we don't understand,
when we feel lost and alone,
we can trust you.
When we wander in the wilderness,
thank you that you are there by our side,
that you reach out and touch us
with outstretched, open arms.
Thank you, Lord, that we are safe with you.
For you provide all we need,
that which is 'on earth' and that which is eternal.
Amen.

Prayer of Intercession:

We offer our prayers for those in need, naming people and situations that are on our hearts today.

We offer our prayers for our world, for the leaders of the nations, that they may work together to bring justice and healing as we move through the Covid pandemic.

We offer our prayers for your church, that it may be sustained by your grace, and may build communities of love, where people may be accepted, supported and inspired by its faith in you.

We offer our prayers for ourselves. You know our deepest needs, our hopes and fears, come to our hearts that we may know you leading us through these troubled times.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
Now and forever,
Amen.

Hymn: I, the Lord of sea and sky (StF 663)

Blessing

As we seek to do what you want, Lord,
may we bring bread to the hungry –
food for bodies and food for souls,
strength for the journey, and hope for the future.
And the blessing of God,
Creator, Saviour and Sustainer,
Be with us now and for evermore.

Amen

If you wish to follow the hymns online here are the links:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds (StF 322)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoPlwPUYWaw>

Take this moment, sign and space (StF 513)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFYt0S2UFDU>

Jesu, the joy of loving hearts (StF 365)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dSgeLw625s>

Hymn: I, the Lord of sea and sky (StF 663)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgLwH5RdtPk>