

## **Sermon for 2<sup>nd</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> October 2022, Year C, Harvest Festivals**

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35**

**Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden**

### **Sermon**

I think the church is being a little bit provocative in choosing this gospel reading for Harvest Festivals. Here we all are, ready to give thanks for the harvest and those who have worked so hard to produce it, and yet Jesus is saying, “Don’t get distracted by the food. What’s much more important is the inner transformation that comes from the soul-food that never goes off”. It’s a different kind of food feeding a different kind of hunger – a desire to be whole, happy, content, full of kindness, patience, self-control. But let’s back up a bit. Some of us may not be familiar with this story. Why are all these people running around, chasing after Jesus, begging him for bread and miracles?

Just before this passage, Jesus was on the opposite side of the sea of Galilee in northern Israel, where most of the first part of his ministry took place. He’d probably only be about 31 or 32 years old, which is astonishing when you think about it. I don’t know about you, but I certainly wasn’t very emotionally mature in my early 30s, and yet here is Jesus attracting great crowds with his wisdom and teaching.

We’re told earlier in this chapter that it’s just before the time of the Passover festival, so all this happens in the middle of spring. Food would therefore have been scarce. Jesus had just performed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, and the people love him for it. They even try to make him king on the spot, but he evades them by going up a mountain to be alone. When the crowds have gone away, he comes back to the lake, walks on water to catch up with the disciples in the boat, and crosses the rest of the sea of Galilee with them.

On the other side, he still can't escape attention, and like a movie star he is quickly surrounded by a large group eager for more free food. In our day they'd no doubt also be demanding selfies. You can probably imagine the chaos.

This is when he starts trying to persuade them that they're missing the point. He didn't come to feed them. If he fed them bread today, they'd still be hungry tomorrow, and still grumbling like the Israelites wandering in the desert when God provided manna to eat, day after day.

Jesus is trying to redirect everyone's attention to God instead. He's saying, "don't get distracted by a religion of convenience that satisfies your physical needs but doesn't change you as a person inside".

In nineteenth-century China, Christian missionaries had an insulting name for people who came to church only because they were hungry for food. These people converted, were baptised, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But once their prospects improved and they and their families no longer needed rice, they drifted away from the church. Hence the missionaries rudely called them "rice Christians."

Similarly, there were those who flocked to the churches in Eastern Europe just before the fall of the Communist regimes – when the church was manifesting courage, and priests were speaking out against totalitarian dictators. The people came to cheer the church on, and to join the congregation in its opposition to the tyrannical state. But after liberation, the crowds dispersed, and the churches began to look as straggling and abandoned as they had before the stirrings of political liberty took hold.

Well, this has been the way of things for most of the Church's history. After the Romans made Christianity their state religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it became hugely popular to be part of the Church, since that was how you got an education and

healthcare, and it was full of all the great and the good of society, who often weren't that good of course, but you get the point.

Most people have always assumed that the point of religion was to meet physical needs or social advancement, but while Jesus does offer healings and miracles of bread, fish and wine, he really seems to think it's a distraction. Instead, Jesus keeps wanting to point to God. Stop trying to make me king just because I produced bread, he says, and pay attention to the one who made all of life, who sustains it right now – who always has and always will.

What does Jesus really want his followers to understand? I think he wants us to understand that God is offering something that doesn't just fill us for a day, then leave us hungry again. Instead, what God is offering is something of eternal value that changes us completely and fundamentally on the inside, something that might eventually, if it spreads like yeast throughout all of society, create heaven on earth.

We can see that transformation in Paul's letter to the Philippians that we read earlier. Paul used to be the sort of person who chased Christians from city to city, trying to arrest them or riling up the crowds to stone them to death. Now, after his revelation of God's love for him he says, "let your gentleness be known to everyone", "don't worry about anything", "think instead about whatever is true, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable. Think about excellent things, worthy of praise". This is a man whom the bible once described as ravaging the Church with threats of murder.

This transformation is what is *supposed* to happen when people come to church. It is supposed to be this radical, to take hearts of stone and turn them into hearts of love, not by giving us free food, but by connecting us with God's love, which is infinitely more important and more powerful.

Perhaps this is why we only receive tiny wafers and sips of wine on Sunday at Holy Communion – it reminds us, even on our Harvest Festival, perhaps especially on our Harvest Festival, that the first purpose of faith is not to fill bellies but to help us experience God’s love. Then sharing everything we have follows naturally on, just as day follows night.

It’s good to come to say thank you to God for all the good things he gives us. And it’s good to be very thankful for all the hard work that farmers and pickers and packers and retailers put in to supply our food, but Jesus insists that life is more than food and drink and what we wear. For him, it’s all about inner transformation, a change of direction from selfishness, indifference or anger, towards kindness, generosity, compassion and peace – not just pretending on the outside but really experiencing it in everything we think and do. How does the transformation happen? There’s no technique, no method. It’s all about relationship with God. Spend time with me, says Jesus, and you’ll soon find out.