

## The Bread Of Life – John 6:24-35

You may not necessarily have noticed, but I've been playing about with our Eucharistic bread at St Peter's.

When I arrived, I found that your current tradition was to have little round coin-like wafers, one each. They're practical, easy to chew and swallow, and easy to dip into the wine (or "intinct") if you're ill and you don't wish to drink from the chalice. But there are some drawbacks to them. For a start, they're not broken. And in a great deal of Eucharistic theology, the important thing is that the bread is broken – Jesus broke bread for his disciples. The symbolism is clear – it was by Jesus being broken on the cross that he could properly be received by us as the bread of life. In the same way, we, in all our defensiveness and tight-wound meanness, should be broken open, like a loaf, and distributed to "love and serve the Lord", following the Eucharist. Finally, we have a rich layer of meaning in the way that we are united in the eucharist (Holy Comm-union), being ourselves the body of Christ, despite our disparate individual selves – "though we are many" we say "we are one body because we all share in one bread". Well, if we don't share in one bread – if we have lots of individual little breads - that won't be true. So you see how much symbolism will be lost if the bread we receive at the Eucharist is a tight little unbroken circle. For that reason, I have looked into trying to obtain bread that must be broken.

We've tried a few things. I bought some quite posh large wafers from a major supplier that were wholemeal (and pretty expensive) and I bought some cheaper options that were white from the Abbey Bakery at Holy Cross Convent in Wales. And then this morning, because Sarah Cooper baked some bread to use as a visual aid for her sermon on the feeding of the five thousand, we used that in the eucharist, and we had real bread. Sometimes Christians don't like real bread for the eucharist – which I think is a little odd. Yes, it gets stuck in your teeth a bit, and most of us don't generally eat a lump of bread on its own: we might find it hard-going. But it is, after all, "daily bread"; and that is what we ask for from God in the Lord's Prayer.

Tonight, we're going to have a half-way house – smaller wafers than concelebration wafers, those known as "Priest's Wafers" (as though, following the veil of the temple being split in two, there should still be a separation of priest and people!) – being broken into smaller pieces. See what you think!

Now, as I say, you might be annoyed with all this mucking about. But I hope you can see that within it, with all the chopping and changing, we're rediscovering something about the Eucharist. Essentially, what happens in the Eucharist is that we *receive* Jesus *afresh* into our lives.

We receive – that’s right, we don’t reach out and take, as though we were shoppers or clients; we receive, like someone given a gift. And there is a grace in learning how to receive gifts – perhaps one I lack - I’m not good at receiving presents! We have to be patient, we have to be humble, and we have to be appreciative of whatever it is we receive: because, after all, this is a gift – it’s not something we deserve or merit. Now, sometimes you might think, at the Eucharist – well, the Priest said that bit wrong, or missed out the prayer that I like, or said “The Blood of Christ” when he gave me the bread, or then gave me the bread in a form I didn’t like. And we might be irked. But that would be wrong, I think – and I’m not just saying that because you might be irked with me! I myself have found myself irritated by some little quirk or minor error in the eucharist. But we should not be like that, because then we’re ignoring the gift that each Eucharist is, to us, uniquely. It reminds us that we’re not all-powerful and self-sufficient, but that we’re utterly dependent on God’s gift to us.

So – we receive. But we also receive *afresh*. Our God is a God of surprises. Jesus was constantly surprising and subverting the expectations of his hearers, as our Gospel story can attest this evening. Expecting the same eucharist each time we receive communion is a bit like expecting to hear the same sermon every week – imagine how boring that would be! No, each service is different, and the way we receive the eucharist from time-to-time should be different because God is never boring, never samey – like Cleopatra, custom can’t stale his infinite variety.

If the bread we receive at the Eucharist really is “The Bread of Life”, we should think about what we’re doing when we receive it – and accustom ourselves to being receivers of gifts, and being people surprised by God. Then it becomes training for our mission of love to the world. Because if we truly love our neighbour, we will have to be able to receive them, as they are, without our own expectations of control; and we shall have to learn to be surprised by the loveliness of our fellow human beings – all part of God’s astonishing, and never boring creation. Amen.

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