



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop this evening gave the sermon during an Evensong service with The Mercers Company. This follows in full

‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat’, said Jesus.

‘Are you having a laugh?’ Philip replied, ‘Six months wages wouldn’t be enough to buy bread for this lot.’

‘Here is a boy with a few bits of bread and some fish that his mum has made for him’, said Andrew.

‘Good’, said Jesus. ‘Get the people to sit down.’

Who is this small boy?

We don’t know.

Has the blessed apostle, Andrew, wrenched the lunchbox from his grasp, desperate to fulfil Jesus’ ambitious and impractical plans for lunch?

Hardly.

The narrative drive of this well-loved story isn’t Jesus’ miraculous intervention, well, not at first, but this small boy’s almost miraculous generosity.

For who would give away all their lunch? And surely there are other lunches in the crowd, but no doubt carefully concealed, no doubt in the hands of adults who know better than to give away everything. I mean, what good would that do?

Jesus takes the bread. He gives thanks. He breaks it. Everyone is fed.

For John writing the story there is a clear and unambiguous Eucharistic pattern, that the infant church, first receiving the story, would have instantly recognised, because this is what they do Sunday by Sunday. But we, too, who also attend the Eucharist, may have missed the bite.

Yes, Jesus multiplies the bread. Yes, there is so much left over that the disciples are instructed to gather up the fragments and 12 baskets are filled. But the bread that Jesus takes and uses has to come from somewhere. It is the bread we offer him.

And what of the bread we hold back?

That’s where this evening’s reading ended. It’s a story many of us know well. We will have heard many sermons on it. Here’s another.

But I want to move on. Because in John’s Gospel the story continues. There is the bread we bring to Jesus. But there is also the bread he is for us.

So let’s call what just happened, Day One. Jesus feeds 5000 hungry people with the contents of one small boy’s lunchbox. And move on to Day

Two. For the next day the same 5000 people return.

Well, you would, wouldn't you!

You've had a fantastic free lunch on day one. It stands to reason you will come back for another free lunch on day two. However, this time Jesus doesn't feed them, and to paraphrase what is actually a rather long and beautiful passage in John's Gospel, on day two, Jesus says, 'I am the bread'. And when the crowd hear him say this, they don't like it; it's too difficult; they quickly disperse.

Then at the end of John Chapter 6, one of the most poignant passages in the whole gospel story, Jesus is alone with his disciples. He turns to them in the sadness of the moment and says, 'Well, I suppose you're going to go as well'.

Peter steps forward.

'Where else can we go?' he says. Which I suppose means, 'I'd love to go! If there is an exit, show me the exit.' But then, these beautiful words which show that Peter has indeed learned that Jesus is the bread; that he is, like bread, the most basic thing we need: 'You have the words of eternal life', he says. Therefore, as well as the bread of life, also the script of life, the meaning of life, the hope of life eternal, prefigured in the broken bread. There is, literally, nowhere else to go.

Lent is that season of the church year when we re-set the compass of our discipleship and think deeply about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus.

This story teaches us two things --

One. It is not the contents of our lunchbox, not the size of our bank balance, not the glowing references attached to our CV telling people what a wonderfully gifted, experienced and eminently employable and loveable person we are, but the generosity of our hearts, our willingness to give what we have to Jesus and let him take our gifts, our money, our resources, our time and energy and use them and transform them so the world can be fed.

That small boy allowed what he had to be taken and blessed and multiplied and used.

He gave Jesus all his lunch, not just one small bit of it. So why are we often so mean? How have we failed to realise that generosity isn't measured by the amount we give, but by how much is left over after we've finished giving, that widows mites are worth more than millionaires' millions. And who were those other people in the crowd who kept their lunchboxes hidden? And are we more like them than we realise?

Lent is a season for repentance.

Lent is a season for giving.

Lent is a season for learning what matters. What is basic and what is fundamental.

It is about giving things up, not because God likes it when we are miserable, but because, in the end, everything is secondary to God, and in the end, everything must be relinquished. And in the end, there will be that day when God invites us to give up breathing itself. And on that day, there really is nowhere else to go. And there really is only one thing we need to know, and it is not the meals and banquets and riches and ever bigger barns of the world –though don't misunderstand me, I'm not at all saying these things are wrong in themselves, it is what we do with them, how we offer them, which is why I am, even though it's Lent, looking forward to dinner later.

But, secondly, I do need to learn a more radical dependence on God. I need to learn and then let everything else in my life be built upon it, that the most basic thing of all is that Jesus is the bread of life and Jesus is the script.

He is the one who will keep body and soul together. In this life, and in the life which is to come.

His peace and his life are my only hope, and the only hope for the world.

You Mercers, if I have understood it correctly, are purveyors of fine cloth. You have a wonderful tradition of philanthropy and service, a determination to use what you have for the common good, particularly for young people in education, older people and housing, church and communities. It is your common thread.

This Lent, with such horrors ravaging Europe again, and peace itself, so easily taken for granted, so at risk, let us see in Jesus Christ what our humanity can be and learn again these two things: Generosity in sharing what we have; Dependence on God.

I even dare to hope that our government may give a more generous welcome to refugees fleeing Ukraine, many now stranded in Calais, many more needing help and refuge. We must see in them what Jesus saw in that multitude gathered around him, people in need of warmth, security, sanctuary and bread. It is shameful that we lag behind on this. It shows how much we still have to learn about following Jesus.

'I am the living bread that came down from heaven', says the Lord. 'Whoever eats this bread will live forever.' (John 6.51)

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