

## SUNDAY SERMON

ON 2 KINGS 4:42-44, EPHESIANS 4:1-6, JOHN 6,24-35

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My first glance at the readings for this morning from 2 Kings and St John's Gospel revealed a re-occurring motif of food, specifically bread: not a bad starting point for this week when we are fed so well by our hosts and share so much between ourselves over meals. By the Word of the Lord spoken by Elisha in 2 Kings, the twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain multiply and become enough to feed 100 hundred men and have some left over. In the Gospels we have several accounts of Jesus feeding large crowds of people with impossibly small amounts of bread, and again have baskets full of bread left over. The extravagant, wasteful generosity of God is shown in both examples.

The reading from 2 Kings is chosen by the lectionary to complement Jesus' description of himself as the Bread of Life but this isn't the only time that Elisha is involved with food. Earlier in the same chapter he is shown helping the widow and her two sons with the oil that continues to flow until every jar, jug and bowl she can find is full. Just before today's reading a deadly pot of stew is purified through Elisha's actions to make it edible for those who need to eat it.

Food is a central image in scripture and in our lives of faith. The manna in the desert, the Passover meal, and the Christian Eucharist all hold enormous significance. The *Imitation of Christ* (by Thomas a Kempis) talks about the two tables of the Eucharist, the table of the Word and the table of the Sacrament. And, of course, Christians have had their arguments which of these tables is the most important!

Bread, food, is a basic necessity for life. Bread isn't something necessarily fancy, though it can be. It is the food of everyday living, eaten with almost every meal. Scripture recognizes this. The Israelites on their journey are fed by the manna given by God. Some of Moses' most sticky situations arise when the people are complaining about a lack of food or water – or simply because they are becoming bored of the manna! The point though, is that God is doing more than simply feeding his people; he is showing his concern for their well-being and seeking to train them in obedience and trust. And as we have seen he is generous, overwhelmingly, wastefully generous.

In today's Gospel Jesus' complaint about his listeners is that they have purely material concerns – *Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.* (John 6:26) It is probably not surprising; how wonderful it would be to have your fill of bread so easily, to always have your food on tap through a miracle worker! And we humans have a tendency to approach religion for what we can get out of it. As the saying goes, we prefer the gifts of the Giver to the Giver of the gifts.

In Elisha's case this is God-given food meant for sustenance. 2 Kings tells us that there was a famine in the land – hence the deadly stew; someone had been gathering unknown gourds to add to it and had picked something poisonous. A gift of bread would have been both welcome and necessary. The miracles of feeding performed by Jesus occur when he is concerned for the well-being of the crowd; it is late, and they still have travel home. Those listening may be in need of food to sustain them on their journey.

But whether we are thinking about Elisha or about Jesus, the provision of food isn't really the main point, however much it may have been needed under the circumstances. There is something deeper happening. Below the practical level we see the gracious provision of God, supplying our needs, and encouraging us to grow in faith and in trust.

Bread in the bible is about the way in which God sustains and nourishes us. Jeremiah writes: *Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart. (Jeremiah 15:16)*

The words of God become the means of sustenance, the way of nourishing our souls. Jesus talks about himself as bread, as source of life and growth. He talks about the bread that endures to eternal life, telling us to work for that, rather than for bread that perishes, and promises to give that bread to those who believe in him. Just as the physical food that we eat is assimilated into our bodies and gives growth and strength, so the bread given by Jesus in Word and Sacrament is assimilated into our lives. Or to put it better, we are assimilated into it.

When Jesus tells his followers that he is the Bread of Life what does he mean? The Gospel tells us not to stop at the purely material, the literal bread produced so easily in the miracle. We are to assimilate this staple part of our spiritual diet, this bread of life, so that it forms who we are and how we act. We look to the Word of God for instruction and encouragement, at times for rebuke and correction, but as with Jeremiah, as the joy and delight of our hearts.

In Christian monastic tradition the practice of *lectio divina* became a foundational way of prayer. It is often surrounded by metaphors of eating. We eat the word, chewing it carefully to extract all its goodness; like cows who regurgitate their food for a second peaceful chewing, we regurgitate what we have read for further mulling over. Praying the scriptures leads us into the presence of God until, as St Paul says in the letter to the Galatians (4:19), Christ is formed in us.

Let us all turn gladly to feed on this word of God, this bread of life given for our lives, given so freely and generously to us.

*All scripture quotations are from the ESV, English Standard Version, 2001.*

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