

East Durham Methodist Circuit:
On-line Service for 1st August 2021

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Theme: The Bread of Life

Call to worship:

Joining together in worship we are invited to acknowledge the loving care and compassion God has for each of us. Come: listen to the words of encouragement and call on our lives and hearts - and God's desires for our faithful response to the message of Jesus.

Come let us worship God.

Hymn: Praise to the Lord the Almighty Joachim Neander **StF 88 / H&P 16**

1. Praise to the Lord, the almighty, the king of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear; brothers and sisters draw near,
praise him in glad adoration!
2. Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend thee.
Ponder anew what the almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.
3. Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee,
fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee,
then to thy need, he like a mother doth speed
spreading the wings of grace o'er thee.
4. Praise to the Lord, who when darkness and sin are abounding,
who when the godless do triumph, all virtue confounding,
sheddeth his light, chaseth the horrors of night,
saints with his mercy surrounding.
5. Praise to the Lord - O let all that is in me adore him!
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before him!
Let the "Amen!" sound from his people again;
gladly for aye we adore him!

Prayers of praise and confession: Nick Fawcett

Lord of all, in awe and gratitude we offer our praise. We come to sing of Your greatness, to proclaim Your wonder, to remind ourselves of Your might and power and to learn more of Your will for our lives.

We come with thanksgiving for all Your many expressions of love: Your mighty deeds and Your simple everyday blessings, the beauty of the earth and the vastness of the heavens. We acknowledge the rich variety of life and love that surrounds and encircles us each day.

Forgive us for sometimes being blind to it all, failing to see You or appreciate Your goodness. Forgive us for being unmoved by Your presence and uninspired by Your works. Forgive us for worshipping You with our lips while being far from You in our hearts - for worshipping on a Sunday but failing to follow You the rest of the week.

We take a moment in the quiet to bring our confessions to God.

Father, cleanse and renew us we pray. Meet with us again through Jesus, restore and inspire us through Your love and speak to us afresh through Your word. Help us to offer You the worship **not just of words** but of hearts turned to You - and in lives reflecting Your glory.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 16: 2-4 & 9-15 New International Version

² In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions

⁹ Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.'"

¹⁰ While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud. ¹¹ The Lord said to Moses, ¹² "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'"

¹³ That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

New Testament Reading: John 6: 24-35 **Jesus the Bread of Life** New Int'l Vn

²⁴ Once the crowd realised that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

²⁶ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

²⁸ Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." ³⁰ So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

³² Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

³⁴ "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Hymn: **There's a quiet understanding** Tedd Smith **StF 36**

1. There's a quiet understanding When we're gathered in the Spirit It's a promise that He gives us When we gather in His name There's a love we feel in Jesus There's a manna that He feeds us It's a promise that He gives us When we gather in His name	2. And we know when we're together Sharing love and understanding That our brothers and our sisters Feel the oneness that He brings Thank You, thank You, thank You, Jesus For the way You love and feed us For the many ways You lead us Thank You, thank You, Lord
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Message: **The Bread of Life**

In our Old Testament reading we are at a point when Moses has led the Israelites from servitude in Egypt. But this story does the people no credit at all as it wasn't long before the complaints started - which seems incredible considering they had just been liberated.

But their hunger was dampening their spirits. Before they had even crossed the Red Sea the people complained to Moses, '**It would have been better... to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness**' Ex 14:12, and three days later they complain again, '**What shall we drink?**' Ex 15:24. They were given clean water.

Today we read of them a month later complaining a third time, forgetting the reality of their situation in Egypt and now saying: '**we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted**'. Their dream of freedom is fading, and they look back to what they now see as the comforts of their captivity.

As ever, God listens to the complaints of the freed Israelites and responds with grace: quail in the evening, manna in the morning; all the sustenance his people need for their journey, and all from the hand of God, demonstrating His commitment to them, His compassion for them and His love. The wilderness becomes a place of plenty.

It shows that God recognises our human need for what we would call the basics of life. Manna was something they had never seen or eaten before - it would have been risky. They had to trust - trust it would be good and not harmful. God provides - He provides food with the proviso that they take only enough for each day. So it's a bit of a test - they must continue to have faith and trust that He will continue to support them. The food comes morning by morning in God's time. They cannot store it up for future use, except for the Sabbath day, when many restrictions on what they could and couldn't do were laid down.

This gift from God is to be used as He specifies - it's a powerful and miraculous demonstration of His provision to meet the needs of His people. This new bread will become a staple of their diet for 40 years and when we pray **give us this day our daily**

bread well in all likelihood, it refers to this time, when God did provide daily bread for the Israelites.

The desert they walked during the Exodus has become a symbol of the path of prayer and the search for God. Jesus himself retreated to the desert after His baptism where he stayed for 40 days - a symbol of the 40 years His Hebrew ancestors would wander in the desert in search of productive land where they could finally settle.

And we know how hostile an environment the desert is. Lack of water particularly is life threatening. Food is scarce. Jesus experienced the hardships Himself as He was tempted by Satan to turn the desert stones into bread. Heat and thirst had left Him vulnerable to temptation. But He was sustained through faith and prayer.

From earliest Christian times people dwelt in the desert in imitation of Jesus. They sought God in the stillness. I am reminded of the time I stood at Wadi Qelt which is the famous road between Jericho and Jerusalem where the tale of the good Samaritan was set. And there is a monastery, cut from the cliff, a place of pilgrimage for those seeking to reflect on their faith. The monastery is known for its hospitality - the landscape is definitely inhospitable. It is hot; it is stark and barren, stony ground on a hillside overlooking a dried-up river bed.

So, having experienced moments in the desert, I certainly have a little sympathy for the Israelites. I could not have stayed out there in the heat for very long – and I had had a meal and was carrying water!

If I am hungry or thirsty, I get short tempered! What's the first thing you do when you get home from a day at work or an outing? Kettle on and a meal in the oven! We are fuelled by food - and you may remember the lectionary a couple of weeks ago related the story of the disciples having been too busy even to eat. Jesus told them to take time out, to rest awhile, to eat and recharge their batteries, otherwise they would be of no use to their call.

Being sustained is important to our physical wellbeing: Quite simply a matter of life or death!

Which brings us to Jesus words from the gospel: **“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.**

What a promise! Never to go hungry again! We don't know very much about the people who were following Jesus around Galilee at that time. They had heard of miracles and initially came to Jesus for healing. Then they had witnessed Him feeding 5,000 people. Perhaps these people were from a society where the source of the next meal was a continual worry, so this particular miracle is a game changer. If they follow Jesus, they may never have to go without a meal again!

Up until now they had watched what was going on and they had received the benefits of Jesus' healing, feeding and teaching. But now there is a revealing set of questions and answers between them and Jesus which tells us a lot about what the people expected or were looking for in Jesus.

They had just received a free meal. They weren't hungry anymore and wanted things to stay that way, but these verses also give us Jesus' own definition of His role. I am the bread of life! His listeners need to think about what He is saying to them. What does He mean? And cheekily, they ask for more signs! They had witnessed a miracle but still they want more from Him!

They refer to the Exodus story. As the Israelites are promised that they shall have their fill of bread, so Jesus tells them that those who come to Him shall hunger no more: **Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.**

The manna of old was only a temporary provision. It wasn't given to their ancestors by Moses but by God! And God is doing it again. Now before them is the real bread from heaven - Jesus himself! He's not going to give them more signs, He is not going to march on Jerusalem and make the walls fall down as Joshua did when the Exodus ended. He points out the truth of His presence.

More important than solving their physical hunger for food through bread, **Jesus offers Himself** as their sustenance, offers Himself to fulfil deeper longings, as verse 27 says food **that endures to eternal life.**

They know they don't want to be hungry again so they ask what should they do to receive this food? The answer is nothing, it is a gift, a gift from God! They (and we) just have to believe and trust that Jesus can satisfy the hunger of their souls. So, do they want 'eternal life' the salvation that Jesus offers?

He needs them to understand who He truly is! And only when you can see that can you begin to understand what He can do for you, what His gift genuinely is. The gift only He can give you! And there is no law enforcing this - it just needs a change of heart. **"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."**

A new relationship needs to be established. Jesus' words and actions stirred people up, puzzled them, angered them, stimulated them, engaged them, worried them and challenged them. Jesus offers them the choice to change - to have the opportunity of discovering more about God than they can ever have imagined.

Believe in Me He says, the one who came to tell us that God is a loving Father, a forgiving Father and that our lives should reflect that trust and love.

And to grow in that relationship we need Jesus. We need to learn from Him, to feed on Him.

'Feeding on Christ'. I know people have issues with the phrase, but what does it actually mean? Eating and drinking involve tangible physical actions. Eating and drinking metaphors are common to us. We **chew** things over, we find some things hard to **swallow**, we **bite** off more than we can chew, we get **fed** up. The language of feeding is all around us in our everyday lives, so we understand needing food and how it feels to be full-up and satisfied.

And that's why we can understand the phrasing of this passage. It's no surprise too that this passage and chapter of John's Gospel provides us with much explanation of the significance of Holy Communion. It's something I took particular interest in when I discovered that regular partaking of communion was a prerequisite to being considered for a note to preach!

I can think of so many times within worship or bible study and particularly holy communion when I have felt so uplifted and close to God: fulfilled, contented, satisfied, full of love and awe and wonder and so very aware of being in His presence. Perhaps you can recall and reflect on times like that yourself.

And just as we need to eat and drink to sustain ourselves physically, so we need to keep spending time with God in prayer, bible reading and study, worship and sharing in Holy Communion, so that spiritually, we will be growing strong and healthy. And even being physically frail bears no relation to our spiritual health.

A life of faith is not easy. It wasn't for the Israelites as they wandered through the period of Exodus. It wasn't for the crowds on the shore wanting more and more from Jesus and failing to completely understand Him, and it isn't for us. It's not the comfortable option.

Thankfully, we live in a society where Christian faith is a free choice where partaking of the bread of life, attending church and receiving the sacrament is allowed and offered.

The followers of Jesus were given the same choice as the Israelites: life or death, 'fast food' to feed their physical hunger or the bread of life!

Bishop Tom Wright says that verse 34 can be used to this day, as it stands, as the prayer that we all need to pray if our deepest needs are to be met. ³⁴ **“Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”**

Do we just want enough of God to keep us ticking over, day to day or week to week? Or do we yearn for a deeper, eternal fulfilment? Only Jesus can truly feed that hunger in our lives. And, using us, as we live our lives in and through Him, is the way God can transform and change this world, which is in so much need of love and service.

So my question to you, dear Reader is: What will you choose? **Amen**

Hymn: Seek ye first the kingdom of God Karen Lafferty **StF 254 / H&P 138**

1. Seek ye first the kingdom of God
And His righteousness;
And all these things shall be added unto
you.

**Allelu, alleluia.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,
Allelu, alleluia.**

2. Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find.
Knock, and the door shall be opened
unto you.
Allelu, alleluia...

3. We shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the
Lord.
Allelu, alleluia...

Prayers of Intercession: Susan Sayers

Response: **Feed us Father with the Bread of Life**

Let us pray to the God who loves us, knows our needs and provides for us.
We pray for a deepening hunger for the things of God; and a loosening of our grip on all the wants and expectations which prevent us from moving forward God's way.

Feed us Father with the Bread of Life

We pray for respect and reverence among people regardless of wealth or status; for responsible sharing of resources and consideration of our fragile beautiful natural world.

Feed us Father with the Bread of Life

As we prepare to eat our food each day, we pray for those who grow and manufacture it, who distribute it and sell it, those who shop for and cook it and for those with whom we share our food. Build us up with Your spiritual feeding Lord which sustains us forever.

Feed us Father with the Bread of Life

We ask for daily bread, we pray for those who are physically starving, for all who hunger emotionally. We pray for those who do not trust in the sustaining love of God.

Feed us Father with the Bread of Life

As we remember with love those who have passed away, we pray that, nourished by the bread of life, they will rest in eternal life.

Feed us Father with the Bread of Life

And we pray for ourselves (take a moment of silence). May we be aware of our own spiritual hunger and that Jesus can satisfy all our needs if we come before Him in trust, faith and prayer - giving thanks for the wonder of this gift and blessing.

Merciful Father accept these prayers for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.**

Amen

Hymn: Great is Thy faithfulness Thomas O. Chisholm **StF 51 / H&P 66**

1. Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be

**Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me**

2. Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love
Great is Thy faithfulness...

3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside
Great is Thy faithfulness...

Blessing:

Go now to do the works of God knowing that whatever your strengths and weaknesses, God goes with you; trust Him as Father; believe in His Son and be open to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen