

**SERMON FOR TRINITY 9 AT WINTERBOURNE STOKE: 28 JULY 2024
(based on 2 Kings 42:42-44; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21)**

Sharing and nourishing

July 25th marked the feast of the apostle James. He was a fisherman, and along with his brother John, was called by Jesus to become a disciple. James gave up his means of income, his family, everything to follow Christ. What a leap of faith! At some level, on that day, he realised Christ would provide what was required to live. But what was his, and the other disciples', understanding of that, or indeed of discipleship? Simply to follow in awe? And who was the Jesus they were called to follow? Today's readings offer clues as the lectionary turns from Mark to John for five weeks, focusing on the theme of Jesus as 'the bread of life'.

The Old Testament reading is a great introduction to the Gospel's theme of bread-sharing, where a little goes a very long way. Elisha divides twenty loaves among a hundred people. Those loaves were the 'first fruits' of the harvest, given by a man to Elisha to offer to God as creator of the land and its produce. Elisha does not just dedicate the food to God, but goes on to share it out among those hundred people - there was even some left over. The message here is that God provides, and that we are to share. And because Elisha's sharing was effectively a holy offering, it's not too much of a stretch here to see a link with our Eucharist services. What God provides, we have a duty to share.

Our Gospel reading was from John chapter 6, which begins with two stories that raise a question: "Who is Jesus?". The reveal comes gradually, through Jesus' response to need. In his well-known telling of the feeding of the 5000, John establishes a link with the prophet Moses. The episode takes place near the time of the Passover festival, celebrated to remember the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses'. Similarly in John, the crowds follow Jesus for miles, though not as far. They want miracles, just as the Israelites did; and like Moses, Jesus goes up a mountain. Moses fed the people in the wilderness, and Jesus likewise ensures his crowd of followers is fed. Possibly the crowd too made that connection with Moses when they talked of Jesus as "the prophet who is to come into the world". John deliberately calls the feeding miracle a "sign", something that reveals or indicates. For the real import of

Jesus' activity wasn't simply to feed those who were hungry, but to reveal something vital about himself - that he, Jesus, was the one to satisfy every human need. However, signs can easily be misinterpreted. The crowd was right in seeing Christ as someone sent by God, as indeed Moses had been, but wrong to limit him to the status of a prophet.

Similarly, the disciples don't quite grasp the significance of Christ's question: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?". Philip responds with concern about the cost of the enormous amount needed. In those questions - where and at what price - John is pointing both to Jesus' divine identity, and his fate. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the answer goes far deeper than the practical problems the disciples thought they faced in the task of finding food for these people. At Christ's ultimate Passover, he will break bread to represent his body - he is the bread of life. And finally, he will pay the price as his body is, in turn, broken on the cross.

Then the boy turns up with the loaves and fish. After giving thanks (another Eucharistic link), Jesus distributes the food, and as in the Old Testament story, again with plenty left over. That huge crowd, who had come so far to see Jesus perform more signs, got their wish. And from that, they understood him to be someone promised to them. His purpose, in their view, was to lead them out of the tyranny of Roman rule - a new king, an earthly, political ruler. That basic misunderstanding will be the very thing for which Jesus is later tried and executed. They want to follow him on their own terms. But Jesus is far more than someone to follow and wonder at. In the wilderness, it was God not Moses, who fed the Israelites - Moses merely asked God to solve the problem. That day on the mountain, Jesus himself fed the people, using a seemingly insignificant donation. He did so with bread; he will do so again with his own body.

A clearer answer to the question of 'who is Jesus' is given in the walking on water story. The crowd's need was food to sustain them. In the boat on the rough waters, the disciples need Christ's presence. He calms their fears by identifying himself, as he walks across the water, with the words God used in the Old Testament: "It is I". This divine Jesus brings them to safety; he is their salvation. We likewise need Christ in our lives in order to be saved. Which leads us into the passage from Paul's letter to the

Ephesians, a humble prayer to God. It asks that the people of Ephesus be strengthened; that they may receive Christ into their hearts; and that by knowing Christ's love, they may be "filled by the fullness of God". Not bread, but spiritual sustenance. Jesus wanted people to know that through Christ, God would nourish us. It is both a matter of following, as James and the other disciples did so faithfully, and of understanding exactly who we are following and what that means.

The crowd in the Gospel reading wanted miracles and food; the disciples wanted a practical solution to a concrete problem. Jesus provided for their material needs, but this is not what he came to do. Rather, he came to reveal that God's essential character is loving, and God's overriding desire is to be, through his Son, accessible and available to his people. Today's texts suggest that we are not to follow blindly, looking to Christ solely for our physical needs, but that we should see him as our spiritual nourisher - Jesus Christ, the bread of life, given to us by God to sustain us and, importantly, to share.

May we, as we negotiate the stormy sea of life in our frail boats, have the faith and courage to offer him our hearts as his dwelling place.

In the name of Christ, amen.