

Slide 1 - I Am the Bread of Life

This week, I've been reading a book called *Our Daily Bread*. It is written by Father Alex, an Anglican priest in St Matthew's Church in Burnley, and he tells of his challenging and harrowing experience of working amongst people who are hungry.

He writes about the darkest days of the pandemic, people from the Burnley estates queued in the freezing cold to receive makeshift food parcels, and he and another clergyman spearheaded this operation – a lifeline to many of Burnley's poorest souls.

I am the bread of life became a reality for the poorest in Burnley.

This scene was replicated up and down the UK, and still exists today.

George Square most evenings, hungry souls gather and queue from about 6 p.m. to receive food parcels from a charity called Kindness; there is irony in this scene for on one side of the square you have the grandeur of the council offices at the City Chambers, and on the other side you have people dining at expensive restaurants, and then in the middle of the square, you have this long queue of hungry people waiting for a food handout. That's the reality of George Square most evenings; hungry souls they are searching for the bread of life.

When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life", he was speaking to hungry people who knew the benefits of having bread.

Bread was the absolute staple diet in Jesus' community. When the sound of the millstone in a town or village was not heard, it symbolised the death of a community; without a millstone to grind the bread, there would be nothing to exist on.

Bread and its production were of fundamental importance to those hungry people.

As you can imagine food was scarce and a great problem for 1st century folks in Galilee and Judea.

Food is also scarce for some in our society today, that's why we have foodbanks. Not that there is a scarcity of food, you only have to go to Morrisons at the Cross, and you realise that the variety is huge; I can remember having visitors from Uganda, and when they went into the supermarkets they couldn't believe the choice of cereals that we have here, but some folks don't have the resources to buy food and that's basically why we need foodbanks.

In my previous church, about 12-15 years ago, we started a foodbank in the church hall; foodbanks were just beginning. They have since grown rapidly.

The Food Foundation data shows that in January 2024:

20% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity

20% of households with children reported that children were directly experiencing food insecurity

45% of households in receipt of Universal Credit reported experiencing food insecurity

24% of households of non-white ethnicity are food insecure, they are 1.6 times more likely to be food insecure than white (15%)

38% of households with an adult limited a lot by disability experienced food insecurity, 3.6 times more than households with adults not limited by disability (11%)

35% of single adult households with children have experienced food insecurity

15% of those in some kind of employment were food insecure, showing that being in work doesn't guarantee that you'll have enough money to afford food

There are many in our society who are hungry.

Where I ministered in my last charge, was a diverse community, there were many who had much and who could say, my cup runs over, and many who had little; there was private housing and there were high rise flats going up to over 30 floors; there were people with lovely gardens and many with none, and the two lived side by side; however, this didn't reflect in the church demographics; I have found in my ministry, even in poorer areas, the churches are more likely to have well-heeled folks rather than the poor, this is not a judgement on those who come to church.

I can remember Rev John Harvey of the Iona Community speaking once at University, about his book, *Bridging the Gap – has the Church failed the poor?* – published 1987 - which speaks about the credulity gap between the church and the poor in our society, and how do we bridge that gap? He admitted that he didn't have easy answers, and said it's always been a problem. Jesus said something similar 2000 years ago, the poor you will always have.

Rev John was passing the baton over to the new batch of ministers some 30 years ago. That gap is still there, but even wider. Rev John put his faith into action and took his young family to live in a flat in the midst of the Gorbals, which at that time was recognised as one of the most deprived areas in Europe. For him, ministry amongst the poor must be done in the community, living with them and sharing together, just like Rev John Millar did at Castlemilk Church.

How do we feed needy and hungry people without being patronising and condescending? It's easy to say, "I know how you feel", when we don't really know what it is to be hungry.

That for me was the biggest challenge at the foodbank in my previous church.

Can you imagine the logistics of getting a foodbank up and running - organisations who have been in the church since year dot, feeling the storage squeeze; the heavy lifting of boxes and people turning up at all odd times looking for food and support; people who were coming along who weren't the church type.

Yes, the foodbank opened a Pandora's Box but the blessings outweighed the challenges and people of the church quickly began to see that this was the church in action, that this was the work of Jesus feeding the hungry and people rallied round and generally supported the work. "The evils inside the box can be seen as the challenges and difficulties of life, while the hope represents the optimism and resilience to overcome those challenges."

I quickly realised that the need was huge, not only did we have professional people coming who had lost their jobs, and were down in their luck; we had folks who had social issues and mental health issues, and we had people who had arrived from other countries seeking asylum and who couldn't speak the language, who had nothing but the clothes they were wearing on their back, but they all came for one reason, they were searching for the bread of life, searching for food, which was their daily survival; but we realised that there were other reasons, and so we utilised a small hall to become a tea and toast café, a place that hungry people could find some dignity, as they waited for their food parcels to be prepared, so they would feel that they weren't treated like beggars, but were treated like human beings, made in the image of God, who not only wanted physical food, but also wanted some spiritual food; not in the sense of immediately coming to a church service, but certainly in the sense of someone listening to them, someone sitting with them, and being in that space for those few moments, being a little oasis in the week, being a light in their dark valley, perhaps their only opportunity of the week to have someone by their side.

Not every church can open a foodbank, God has many different ways of leading churches to reach out to their community; here at Cadder Church, one of our excellent outreaches is the coffee shop and shop, which is open during the week, reaching out and fulfilling many purposes, bringing people together for fellowship, a meeting place for people hungry for company and friendship and during the pandemic the coffee shop reached out into our parish bringing meals and shopping to people facing desperate times, and many people from inside and outside the church took up the challenge and helped to reach out to those who were struggling and isolated.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life”, and these words find their locus in the aftermath of Jesus feeding 5000 people with bread and fish. This event was very much on the disciples’ minds, and they were obviously moved by the miracle, as was the crowd, who wanted more – they wanted to see more of what Jesus could do!

But this was not the type of belief, that our Lord was looking for, he was wanting people to take up their cross and follow after him.

So, Jesus turns their minds from human food to spiritual food. When he said, “I am the bread of life”, he was the one they had to deed themselves upon, his audience could relate directly to him, they were seeking these two things, bread and life!

Father Alex begins his prologue in his book by quoting Jesus from Luke's gospel, “Blessed are you who are poor, yours is the Kingdom of God, Blessed are you who are hungry now, as you will be filled. Blessed are you who eat now for you will laugh.”

He writes, “To my mind, poverty, or poorness, isn’t just about financial deprivation, it is spiritual poverty, emotional poverty, poverty of aspiration, poverty of well-being. It is about people suffering from mental or physical health issues...It's very easy to be a disciple of Jesus when the sun is shining and everything is going well – but what about when we are faced with suffering, when we are faced with trauma or grief or being unable to feed our kids? What then?

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life”.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and *Beth* means house and *lehem* is Hebrew for bread. Our Saviour was literally born in the house of bread. It is a lovely thought, the one who can feed us with spiritual bread was born in a house of bread.

Psalm 23 has fed the souls of many hungry people down through history. The author of the psalm, David, knew what it was to be lonely and persecuted, to be hunted and to be on the run. But he also knew what it was to discover God in all the ups and downs of life and that’s why he could write the 23rd Psalm.

Slide 1 – “The Lord is my shepherd I lack nothing” – David knew God to be like a shepherd, he knew him to be the bread of life; he knew God personally, so he can say, *he is my shepherd* – it’s a personal relationship. You see when God wants the best for us both physically and materially. He knows Pandora's Box has been opened, the moment that Adam and Eve took the bite from the apple. The psalmist tells us that God is our shepherd, and when we know this and trust in him as our provider, then we will be fed instantly, fed in our inner spirit, which will give us courage and hope.

Slide 2 - He makes me lie down in green pastures and he leads me beside quiet waters

It is said, "If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together." It's a lovely thought, isn't it?

British and American researchers demonstrated that people estimated the size of mountains as significantly smaller if they were standing with someone else as opposed to when standing alone. In other words, "social support" matters—so much so that it causes even the size of mountains to shrink in our minds.

David found that kind of encouragement to be both lovely and true in his life as he knew God travelling with him, making him to lie down in green pastures and leading him by quiet waters.

It is telling us that we don't have to travel alone in this life. That we have one who seeks to feed us and nourish us and become the bread of life to sustain us on life's journey.

Friendships matter, and when God is at the centre of them, we can spur each other on to do greater things than we might imagine.

Slide 3 - He refreshes my soul

There is an old country song by Jim Reeves, which speaks about how the world is not our home, "we're just a passing through..." Yes, we live in a world that is full of weariness and pain, hunger, debt, poverty, disease and death. But in the midst of it all, we have one who refreshes our souls; one who says "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." When you are weary with life's struggles, find rest in the one who says, "I am the bread of life".

Slide 4 - He guides me along the right paths – When choices have to be made, when we are seeking direction, take your lead from the One who holds all life in his hands, the One who sees the beginning and the end, the One who whispers into our ears, "I am the bread of life", and

Slide 5 -Even though we walk through the darkest valley He is with us, trust on his loving kindness – in the valley we have a friend who sticks closer than a brother, a friend whom we can depend on and who gives us enough light to take the next step.

Slide 6 - My cup overflows – its good to take time to count your blessings and to see that in fact we are a blessed people, despite our circumstances and what life has challenged us with, we can always find things to be thankful for.

Slide 6 - Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all my days and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This is a sublime way to finish the psalm, a reminder of God's constant presence in this life and the next. At funerals we often

hear the words, from the Apostle John, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth”. These words give us a new perspective to life. They speak of life and death in almost the same breath. Two things that will stay constantly with us, grace and mercy, and those will follow us here on earth and into eternity, where the bread of life will be in abundance.

So, this morning we have thought about Jesus's words *I am the bread of life* and Father Alex telling us that these words are relevant in all of our poverty, whether materially or spiritually.

But the thing with bread is that for it to do any good we have to eat it.

We have to ingest before food will sustain and nourish.

You have to make it part of you. Food does no good in the cupboard or the freezer. It does no good to merely inhale its aromas. It does no good just to chew. We have to swallow and digest.

The crowd who listened to Jesus wanted to hearken back to the olden days – manna from heaven. It's so easy to hearken back to the olden days, those days when it all seemed so good, manna from heaven...but were they?

Manna was collected on a daily basis – enough for each day of the week.

The bread of life is gracious provision, made for the needs of those who will go and gather it. We eat to live not live to eat.

They make the classic response to Jesus about this spiritual food – how can we get it? To them, it was something that must be earned – a common mistake of all humans – receiving a free gift does not sit easily with us. What is the work they have to do to receive this bread from heaven?

And Jesus states it simply, believe in the Son of Man – Jesus himself is all that is needed. He will feed them spiritually.

But the belief that Jesus was speaking about was not a cerebral belief, an academic belief; the belief that Jesus desired and desires today, is a belief that says in the words of Frances Ridley Havergall in 1884

Take my life and let it be

consecrated, Lord, to thee.

Take my moments and my days;

let them flow in endless praise,

let them flow in endless praise.

*Take my hands and let them move
at the impulse of thy love.*

*Take my feet and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee,
swift and beautiful for thee.*

*Take my voice and let me sing
always, only, for my King.*

*Take my lips and let them be
filled with messages from thee,
filled with messages from thee.*

*Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.*

*Take my intellect and use
every power as thou shalt choose,
every power as thou shalt choose.*

*Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.*

*Take my heart it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne,
it shall be thy royal throne.*

*Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.*

*Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,*

ever, only, all for thee.

That Jesus is the bread of life includes the meaning that he is the sustenance of life, sufficient for each day. He is sufficient sustenance.

As the psalmist proclaims, he is all we need – with him we lack nothing.

Amen