

THE JESUS DIET, PART III

A SERMON BY THE REV'D DAVID J. ANDERSON FOR THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2009, CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST. ORDINARY PROPER 19.

Perhaps you are wondering, "Is it just me, or is there an echo in the room?" Today's Gospel reading is the third "bread" reading in a row and guess what: there are two more yet to come! Perhaps those learned scholars who compiled the lectionary for us knew that a lot of people are away from church and on vacation at the end of July and into August, so that no one person sitting in the pews will hear all five of the bread readings? Perhaps we should award the prize of a free loaf of bread to anyone who has been in church all five of these Sundays. Is there anyone here this morning that was also here the past two Sundays? Come for the next two Sundays and you will win a prize.

MAKING BREAD

What is it about bread? Bread is the most common of foods in the West (in the East it would be rice, I suppose). Bread is known as well as the "Staff of Life." When we pray as we are taught in the Lord's Prayer, for our "daily bread", we are praying for our daily sustenance. Bread is basic to life. When eaten, bread not only gives us energy, it becomes our bodies. We are, after all, what we eat. Bread is basic food.

Generally, most Sundays, I bake the bread that we share at our Discovery Service Eucharist. It is a simple recipe and I have brought the ingredients with me this morning.

I start with one cup of hot water. To the water I add about 3 tablespoons of olive oil and about 3 tablespoons of honey. (You can see that I measure things carefully). A teaspoon of salt. To this I add about $\frac{2}{3}$ of a cup of whole wheat flour and then about a tablespoon of yeast. It all goes in the bread-maker to mix up the dough and about one hour and twenty minutes later I am ready to roll out the loaves.

When the dough is ready I punch it down and then cut it into four equal pieces. These I roll out into circles of about $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch thick. I score them with a cross which not only is symbolic, but makes them easy to break. Then I put them on a cookie sheet, covering them with a simple wash of milk to help them brown. They are baked in an oven at about 450° for about 12 minutes. Once they are cooled on racks they are ready to be eaten.

It's a pretty simple practice and anyone who would like to try their hand at making our communion bread is welcome to do so. Talk to me and we could perhaps work out taking turns. It adds a meaningful element to our Eucharist, I feel, when a member of the community has baked the bread.

A GREAT MEAL, THOROUGHLY ENJOYED

It's not just bread, but there is something about food. When we think about it we realise that in many encounters that Jesus has with people, a meal figures prominently in the story. When Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, she gets up and prepares a meal. When Jesus heals Jairus' daughter, they give her something to eat. After Jesus' resurrection, the disciples encounter Jesus at the lakeshore broiling some fish and preparing them a breakfast. On the Emmaus road, the disciples recognise Jesus only after they have welcomed him in for dinner and when he takes and breaks the bread. We have only on a recent Sunday read the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding thousands on just a few fish and loaves.

We started our summer vacation this year with a great meal. On our way to the Yukon Territory, we enjoyed a couple of days in Vancouver. On our first night we celebrated Kathy's birthday and the beginning of our trip with a very nice dinner in a lovely Vancouver restaurant. Fiona had her favourite chicken fingers and fries. Kaelynn had the Prime Rib with a Yorkshire Pudding that was as big as her head. Kathy enjoyed a nice steak and I had the Pacific Salmon. A little wine, a great meal, excellent service all enjoyed by our little family, provided us with a wonderful memory of the beginning of our vacation.

There is something about a great meal. I should know: as you can tell, your Rector has not missed too many meals. But as wonderful as a great meal may be, they do not provide us with eternal life.

THE JESUS DIET

A couple of weeks ago, we read the beginning of the Sixth Chapter of John's Gospel and the account of "feeding of the 5,000." From that account, we learn that Jesus "cooked up" an enormous meal for an enormous crowd.

There was no prime rib or chicken fingers, and there was not any steak nor likely any stuffed salmon, but apparently there was plenty of some sort of fish and of course, bread. Twelve baskets of bread were left over, although apparently everyone gobbled up the fish. (I imagine a hillside covered with fish bones.)

Word got around that Jesus had put little expense and preparation, humanly speaking, into this meal; in fact, the whole feast had appeared from a boy's portion. Naturally the crowd followed him when Jesus headed across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. But this time Jesus offered a different type of nourishment. He offered them the bread of life—in other words, himself. In Jesus we have everything we need for life—if we define "life" more broadly than just by our physical needs. Jesus provides God's grace, God's help, guidance and assistance. He provides access to God for our prayers. He helps resolve some of our problems and adverse situations. Other situations he does not resolve for us, but even then he remains present for us as we bring our needs to God. He provides us life forever with God.

What do our lives look like when they're sustained by the bread of life? Many times in our churches, we aren't so much nourished by Christ as wearied by preparations of the meal. I'm talking not about potluck dinners but about all the tasks of ministry. "Sometimes church seems too much like work," I heard someone say not that long ago. Those of you who are really involved up to your eyeballs in this place know what that person is talking about. It's a little like filling up on the appetizer and not having room for the main course. We become satiated by work and not quite filled by the bread and drink that satisfies us spiritually. We remain as needy as ever, and wearied by our efforts.

But when our lives are fed by Jesus' living bread, they begin to look like those described by Paul in Ephesians. Then we attend to our words. We manage our anger. We work not only for our own needs but are mindful of others' needs and generous in responding to them. We encourage and forgive one another. We put away those things like "bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander. . . . and malice," and pattern our lives on God's attitude toward us. Add other "fruits of the Spirit" to the mix, and we have a good picture of a person nourished by Christ and prepared by the Holy Spirit.

As we read in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." This was not enough for the crowds that followed Jesus, of course. Like the Israelites who complained of hunger to Moses, Jesus' opponents complained about him. One can't help but sympathize with them a little. He was speaking eucharistically before there was a Eucharist, and his intimacy with God seemed blasphemous.

Yet even these first hearers, though disgusted by his talk of eating flesh, could understand other parts of his message. God has become clear in the person of Jesus. God approves us, gently draws us to Christ and teaches us. God has taken full initiative to provide sustenance sufficient for this life and the next. He does not fret about how much we eat. He simply invites us to his well-stocked table of abundant blessing. As it was for those early listeners, so it is for us.

Next Sunday I am going to say more about the difference between ordinary bread, or even the manna that God gave the Israelites in the wilderness, and the true and living bread that we receive in Christ. The difference may seem obvious, but you may be surprised how often we are willing to settle for something less than the living bread Jesus offers us. As I said, it is like filling up on the appetizers and not having room for the main course.

So, this morning let us come to this Eucharist expecting to receive Christ anew as he has promised. We come with empty hands. There is nothing we have done or nothing we can bring that makes us worthy to eat at this table. We come because we have been invited. We come because we are loved by the One who invites us. We come because we love God. We come to be nourished by Christ. We come that we might feed on and become more like Christ.