

# MANNA AND LIVING BREAD —THE JESUS DIET: PART II

*A sermon by the Rev'd David J. Anderson, delivered at the Church of St John the Evangelist, Hamilton.*

## WHAT IS THAT?

In conversation with a friend last night, I learned about a new party drug, which apparently has made its way onto the scene here in Canada. This drug doesn't get you high, and apparently isn't addictive, but what this drug does do might surprise you. It affects your taste buds. The drug is consumed in its raw form as a berry. The berry itself is without flavour, but once it is eaten it transforms the taste of everything else you eat for some time. Everything tastes sweet. People drink vinegar and swear that it tastes like the finest Chardonnay. Lemons are eaten and taste like lemonade. The hottest of peppers taste like fresh sweet bell peppers. Should the use of these berries become more mainstream, none of us will be able to be sure what we are eating.

Another conversation, this one at our dinner table last night, focused on table manners. One of those simple manners that children sometimes need to be reminded of before visiting someone else's home for dinner, is that, when served food, you should never ask, "What is that?"

That's one of those questions you don't ask aloud unless you have found a very tactful way to ask the question. I've thought this question sometimes, especially at church potlucks over the years. What is this gray casserole? If you can identify the cook, you can usually be assured of the quality of the food. The food is always good here at St John's.

In John 6, Jesus alludes to the Israelites in the immediate post-Exodus days. They have just left slavery in Egypt and they are making their way through the wilderness. As they proceed on their journey, the people despair over the scarcity of the wilderness and long for the plenty of Egypt. They search three days for drinkable water, only to find a bitter spring. They travel farther and still cannot find food. God has promised them a wonderful land, but this wilderness definitely isn't it.

Eventually the Lord provides them with an unidentified flaky substance that sticks to the ground in the morning. Predictably, the people ask, "What is it? Is it edible? What's it taste like?" The substance is known as manna, which can be translated as "What is it?" (Exod. 16:15).

Manna was sufficient for the people's needs. It was food, period. Jesus contrasts manna with another kind of food, the bread of life. Since Jesus contrasts these two, it is important for us to know and be able to recognise the difference between them.

It is human nature to want to know what food we're being served. So we might ask a similar question of Jesus: What is "the bread of life," the flesh and blood of Jesus which is "the living bread that came down from heaven"?

We hear these words of Jesus where he invites us to eat his flesh and drink his blood in light of the Eucharist in which we take bread and wine and they become for us the body of blood of our Lord. And that is a proper way for us to think about what Jesus is saying. But let's for a moment think about broader, related meanings.

## A SUSTAINING MEAL

Bread is a basic food of life that has to do with sustenance. In the Lord's Prayer, our daily bread generally means "what we need for life." Flesh and blood can also mean a vital, actual life. So Jesus' bread of life is his own life, his own vitality. He gives us his life freely. He gives us grace for living. He gives us access to God, forgiveness of our sins, eternal life and much more. We share life with him more deeply than we share our lives with our relatives and friends. That is what baptism is all about, incidentally. It is about sharing in the life, death and resurrection life of Jesus so that Jesus lives his life in us.

Our family has been having a great summer, but I am aware that there are some people in our parish who have had a difficult summer. Some have struggled, or continue to struggle to overcome illness. Some have experienced recent bereavement. Some have moved from one city to another and others are preparing to move. Today we are gathered for a joyous occasion in the life of the Thompson family and the baptism of Anthony James. We welcome into the family of faith today and this is a joyous occasion. We know, however that not every day will be joyous. The faith we are welcoming Anthony into is one that will sustain him, not only in the happy moments, but perhaps more importantly, in the difficult moments of life as well.

There are days in the life of faith when we feel lost and uncertain. I don't want to be flippant and say, "If you don't feel close to God -- guess who moved." For whatever reasons, there are times in the spiritual life when we feel as though our needs don't seem to be met. Like the Israelites, we feel that God has let us down somehow.

In my own spiritual path, sometimes I've confused manna for the living bread. Both are God-given, but manna doesn't nourish indefinitely. For one thing it has a stale-date. It is best before. When we eat food, we get hungry again.

## MANNA AND LIVING BREAD AND KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE

Manna can be likened to the aspects of the church life that are good and suitable and grace-full but perhaps not absolutely permanent. Manna is the preaching style of a certain priest in the past whom you loved (but what do you do when a new pastor comes along with a different style)? Can you find a different way to eat? Manna is the program ministry of the congregation as wonderful as it can be; it can be good and even lead us to living bread, but it is not itself, the living bread. The church's music, wonderful and beneficial as it is, no matter what the style, or our preference for the flavour, is manna. Manna is the small group to which you're attached -- but people move away and the group magic disappears. Manna is the congregation that you love -- that you'd rather would never change. It is bread that nourishes us and feeds us, but it is not itself the living bread. Christ is the living bread. These other church things can help lead us to Christ, the living bread, and in that is their great value, but in and of themselves they are not the living bread and they should not be confused.

Our greatest disagreements in churches are always about manna, they are almost never about the true and living bread that gives us life. I will often hear comments about the temporary and contingent aspects of our worship following a worship service, only rarely do I hear people reflect upon their experience of Christ. But I want to suggest that is where our focus should be and it is a hunger for Christ that we should seek to develop.

## FEEDING ON CHRIST

Christ's living bread is quite adaptable to all kinds of circumstances; Christ feeds us anywhere, anytime, in all of the ways we've talked about and more.. When we receive his sustenance, we find hope in difficult situations. Amid serious problems, we find solutions that hadn't been there before. Lovely people come into our lives unexpectedly. Not least of all, we receive the peace which allows us to perceive God's grace rather than to become stuck in our unhappiness and our preconceived notions.

So the main message for us this morning is a plea not to worry too much about the manna. There are people without enough daily bread and for them we are rightly concerned to act to feed them. But for ourselves let us hear again the invitation to feed on Christ. Let us not be content to fuss about manna for ourselves only to miss out on the feast of living bread. Let us feed on Christ who can alone satisfy the hungry heart.