

# Come and Eat

## The Bread of Life

Long ago, a thousand years and more before the time of Jesus, the prophet Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, towards freedom in the promised land. There are two special meals in the story of the exodus. The first is the Passover, still kept by Jewish people everywhere: a lamb was slain for every household, a sign of deliverance for every family from slavery to freedom.

The second was the gift of manna, daily bread, which came like dew from heaven and fed the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness. The manna begins to fall after the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 16. The manna ends in Joshua 5, as the people begin to eat the produce of the land. Both of these meals from the time of the Exodus inform and shape our understanding of the gift of Holy Communion.

Welcome to the second podcast in this short series, Come and Eat. At the end of our own journey through the pandemic, in this great unlocking, we've been sustained in many different ways but most of us are tired and weary. This is a season for the gentle regathering of the people of God, as we meet again physically as well as online and the different elements of our worship are slowly restored to us: being together in our buildings; music of different kinds; and most of all the sacrament of Holy Communion, the meal which Christ gives to his church, the meal which brings life.

Last week, we remembered Elijah's journey through the wilderness and Jesus' feeding of the five thousand in John 6: we began our exploration of the Eucharist as a simple meal. Christ invites us to come to his table, to sit and find rest and be restored. We never move past that understanding, but, of course, there is far more to be

said of this meal which has been at the centre of the life and worship of the Church for thousands of years.

In this second podcast, I want to focus on the Eucharist as a particular kind of meal: a meal which looks back and remembers and, in that remembering, brings us life. In our remembering, we forge and reforge our identity as the people of God.

In our ordinary lives, meals often look back and remember, especially family meals: birthdays and special anniversaries, all kinds of celebrations. The Eucharist is this kind of meal. The Eucharist does not only look back, of course: there is a message for the present and for the future as well. We will come to that. But we begin here by following this thread of remembering and looking back.

The manna story is one of the stories we call to mind, sometimes unknowingly, every time we say the Lord's Prayer: give us this day our daily bread. One of the points of manna was that it was sufficient provision for just one day as the Israelites travelled through the wilderness. You couldn't store it or keep it unless the next day was the sabbath. There was no point in hoarding it because it went bad: there was a level playing field for everyone. It was freely available to all, without distinction.

In John 6, on the day after the feeding of the five thousand, the great crowds come looking for Jesus again and find him in Capernaum on the other side of the lake. The crowds contrast Jesus' miracle of feeding with the great sign of manna, given by Moses:

"Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat". Jesus points them to something even better: the true bread from heaven, bread which has a wider purpose. Jesus says, "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world". The response is a prayer: "Sir, give us this bread always".

And this is Jesus' reply, to be read in the context of the manna story:  
"I am the bread of life".

"I am the bread of life." This is one of the great "I am" sayings of John's gospel. Note the word bread but also the word life – one of John's very key words. Jesus not only provides bread which gives life to the world, Jesus is the bread which gives life to the world.

My eye was caught by a newspaper headline this week, in the comment section of the Times. "Neither up nor down, lots of us are languishing". Alice Thomson, the writer, draws on the work of an American organisational psychologist, Adam Grant, to describe the place many people find themselves after the pandemic: languishing – a void between depression and human flourishing. In this season when so many are languishing, it's good to remind ourselves and the whole world that Jesus came to bring life, life in all its abundance and fulness not simply this intermediate state. This gift of life is linked by Jesus here to the picture of bread: "I am the bread of life". The bread which Jesus gives, and is, is more than the food we need to stay physically alive. This is the nourishment we need to have life, to flourish again.

In every Eucharist we look back to the manna. But we look back even more powerfully to the last supper. At the heart of the service is the Eucharistic prayer. There are several Eucharistic prayers in our communion services but they all follow a similar structure. There is a dialogue at the beginning:

The Lord be with you  
And also with you  
Lift up your hearts  
We lift them to the Lord  
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God  
It is right to give thanks and praise.

Although the priest leads the prayer, the dialogue tells us that this is the prayer of the whole people of God. And it is primarily a prayer of thanks and praise – the term eucharist means thanksgiving.

And to give thanks is to look back and to look around us. So all of the prayers begin with thanksgiving and praise on a wide canvas: we praise God for his work in creation, in sending Jesus, in the gift of the Spirit. We join together to praise the Trinity in the great hymn: Holy, holy, holy Lord.

And then in the heart of the prayer, every time we come together in this way, we look back to the Lord's Supper and to the gift of this meal and what it means. The priest prays that by the power of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine we bring may be to us his body and his blood.

“who in the same night that he was betrayed took bread and gave you thanks;  
He broke it and gave it to his disciples saying:  
Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me”.

We are connected in this remembering with the words spoken by Jesus and with his command. There is normally a pause in the prayer at this point. The congregation may make the sign of the cross. In many churches the bread is lifted up and bells are rung.

The priest continues:

“In the same way after supper he took the cup and gave you thanks. He gave it to them saying:  
‘Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, Which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.’”

The bread of the Eucharist looks back to the manna. The wine of the Eucharist looks back to the Passover lamb who was slain. Before we receive Holy Communion, we will say or sing together three times the words 'Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world.' At the Last Supper, Jesus gives this powerful, eternal meaning to his death: 'shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.'

So in this moment we are looking back not only to the final meal of the Lord with his disciples but even more powerfully to Jesus' death on the cross and the meaning of that death for us and for the world: to bring life.

And this looking back and remembering enables us to share powerfully and tangibly and physically in the benefits and blessings of Christ's death on the cross and all that flows from this. We remember and we receive the gift of forgiveness and new life through the physical acts of eating and drinking, and the faith which accompanies them: we take the presence and life of Jesus into our lives as we receive the host or a piece of bread and as we drink wine together.

Jesus says in John 6, 'I am the bread of life.' This is our prayer as we come to share Holy Communion together:

'Accept through him our great high priest this our sacrifice of thanks and praise,  
And as we eat and drink these holy gifts in the presence of your divine majesty – we pray –  
Renew us by your Spirit,  
Inspire us with your love,  
And unite us in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

This is our journey each week, but especially in this present season, from this place of languishing and fogginess and emptiness back to

life: 'renew us by your Spirit, inspire us with your love and unite us in the body of your Son.'

There is an old definition of a sacrament which I've quoted already in this podcast series, which all Anglican Christians used to learn by heart, but not many now do. The words are beautiful and important even though they are a bit neglected.

"A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace."

"An outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." Jesus knows that we are flesh and blood. Our faith must be more than intellectual and cerebral. There must be aspects of our worship that we can do and feel and touch and taste, and which are accessible to everyone. This is the reason for this gift.

The outward and visible sign here is the bread and wine, which are taken and blessed, broken for the bread, poured for the wine, and given, in continuity with the manna, the feeding by the lakeside, the Last Supper. The inward and spiritual grace is the sense of the Lord's presence, of holy communion with God, of resting in God's presence which comes as we receive together, as we remember, as we enjoy and appreciate fellowship with Almighty God in these moments and in what follows. God's love made visible in Jesus Christ is offered to us in this sacrament of bread and wine. We eat and drink and receive Christ deep within us, to inspire and transform us from within from death to life, from hate to love, from fear to peace, from sadness to joy.

We do not receive these gifts through an intellectual understanding. A child is able to receive Holy Communion as a sacrament of God's love just as an adult can. Someone with learning difficulties is able to find as much joy here as a university professor. We come around the table as equals.

And we all receive these gifts through faith: through choosing to trust and believe that God keeps God's promises, that Jesus is present as we remember, in these powerful symbols which he chose and which he gives us, that Jesus is the bread of life.

These are the words of invitation which the priest offers to the people Sunday by Sunday:

“Draw near with faith. Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you, and his blood which he shed for you. Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.”

We come and eat and in this sharing in the meal Christ gives to us we find our life again.

One of my very favourite hymns for Easter is Now the Green Blade Riseth. It's the work of John McCrum, at one time chaplain to one of my predecessors as Bishop of Oxford. The hymn connects the themes of Easter, of springtime, of new life and resurrection. I especially love the final verse this year. Our hearts are indeed wintry, grieving and in pain. I'll read the words to end this podcast, and I've posted on the website a link to a particularly beautiful version of the hymn by Steve Winwood.

Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain,  
Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;  
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

In the grave they laid Him, Love who had been slain,  
Thinking that He never would awake again,  
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Forth He came at Easter, like the risen grain,  
Jesus who for three days in the grave had lain;  
Quick from the dead the risen One is seen:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,  
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again,  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpU01KQIUJM>