

Sunday Nov 1st (all souls/saints/bread day)

The bread of life, as told to an American pastor called Lauren by her people:

A bagel

Rye

Toast with jam

Morning glory muffins

Chocolate tea bread

Rosemary ciabatta

My grandmother's sourdough

My grandmothers' challah

French toast

A crusty baguette

I don't bake much. This feels like a true statement because I've never felt like a baker and up until recently I didn't bake much, but actually this year has seen an uptick in the advent of cakes, the occasional muffin, pizza dough and slices including a recent chocolate and cherry slice in my home.

I still haven't made bread though. Despite how many 'easy bread' recipes there are on the internet, despite how many people were doing it at the beginning of the pandemic, despite my knowing that I don't have to get into the whole sourdough palava if I don't want to, despite being assured that I could probably do it, there remains some kind of mental block. I suspect it's because of two things.

One, the notion of a bread baker being a certain sort of person, wholesome, mother earthy, with a spotless kitchen and an apron she hand sewed, the sort of person I am most definitely not, and two, what bread means, and not just to me.

I often start my day with locally baked high tin sourdough toast, or slices of a round, seeded loaf topped with avocado and hummus, which is always delicious and always appreciated, but well apart from this, bread feels important. It feels central, universal almost.

It inhabits a comforting space inside my mind and memory and I suspect it does for many of you too. There has to be a reason so many people took to making their own breads during our variety of lockdowns this year. Bread is comfort, it is provision, it is steady reassurance and tasty dependability. it is life.

I still think though that when we hear the phrase "I am the bread of life" we might not hear this as sweetly or as loud as we ought.

In our text Jesus is likening himself to Manna, that other bread from heaven which filled the bellies of the Israelites as they wandered through the desert. Bread was life then too, and for the people listening to Jesus it would have been quite central to their lives.

Their ears were perked up at what he said, but this was because he had fed them the day before with literal bread then teased them with the idea that he had magic bread that would ensure they never went hungry again.

As our text opens, he is proclaiming himself that bread, offering a nourishment and a satiation that will never run out. The Manna was a miracle too, it fell from the sky and filled them up and came down in vast, bounteous quantities. In likening himself to this bread he is telling all who will listen that he is food overflowing, good food that will strengthen and bless all who partake, but the difference is his version of the bread from heaven will last you beyond this life and into whatever comes next. Nourishing indeed.

Our relationship with food can be odd, and even quite disordered. For instance in countries where we have enough to eat women particularly get the luxury of feeling at odds with things like bread because we are convinced it will turn us into what we've always learnt was the wrong sort of woman. We are told to be careful, to watch what we eat, that restraint and the declining of this sort of thing are ladylike and proper.

Because of this I very much love how many instances there are of bread or of feeding in general that pop up throughout the biblical texts; God feeding the Israelites and getting an angel to bake for Elijah, God who it is said spreads a huge feast for us in front of our enemies.

And Jesus who turned water to wine so a feast could continue, who fed people on a mountainside and his disciples a breakfast of bread and fish, who taught us to pray that each day we would have enough to eat and not bother worrying about tomorrow's problems, who likened God to the host of a banquet and himself to bread.

It is comforting to me that we can't spoil bread so much that its importance in our lives as metaphor, story, symbol and actual gift is lessened. And it's comforting to me that the God of Israel, fire, wind, thundering voice, judge and creator, is revealed as bread, sent to fill and nourish, to taste good, to warm the belly and accompany a feast. This comes along with the obvious desire to feed God's beloved, like so many parents and friends the world over plying their loved ones with food to help them get through the good times and the very bad.

That we too can know what it is like to want to nourish, to want to gift someone food made lovingly is a wonder.

Food is a literal blessing, either called up over an app, stirred all together in a pot or simply taken from bread bag to toaster.

Something so graspable, so real, so tangible, so fragrant, so utterly understandable is surely a gift from a God who desires all to eat and be satisfied.

The thing about bread is, it requires eating. It points us to a need: I am hungry, or simply "I want bread" and we eat.

Jesus as bread reminds us of our need.

We pray in the prayer he taught us that we be given enough for today. Because we can't do it on our own.

And in the Eucharist we are christened again and again to our own vulnerability as we come to the table with our hands open asking to be filled once again.

I love that when we celebrate the Eucharist -something I've been really missing over the last many months- this thing which is at the heart of our faith, which is the gospel summed up, comes down to a physical taking of physical bread (a wafer, gluten free cracker etc) and the drinking of wine.

We get out of our heads for a moment, out of rationalisations and arguments (it's hard to argue with a piece of bread), we hold out our hands and we eat. No words needed, really.

We come with our faults and brokenness and incompleteness and our bizarre and damaged relationships with food, and our bizarre and damaged relationships with each other, and we remember that we are a communion of wanderers invited to the feast of God. We remember that we need. We remember that for us, our life is caught up in death, that we too are mortal. We come to Christ at the table, hands open, ready to receive, acknowledging we are not complete unto ourselves to feast on love, on a man given to us to show us how to both live and die.

Our loss, our needing, and our state of incompleteness is wrapped up in our holding out our hands, in our being fed and being made new. Just as death and life are both wrapped up in our lives in Christ. Just as all the ingredients which make bread join together and lose what they are in a quite definite way and become something else, so life and loss intermingle at the table as all are recreated into the body of the giver.

And we have all lost. You may have lost people. Perhaps you've lost love, or plans, the lives you once imagined. Maybe we're coping with lost time, the loss of the bodies we once loved so well, our health; perhaps today you're carrying the loss of faith, or certainty.

As we feast we remember that no, we are not complete. This feasting may not cure our loss, we know that, but we are assured by the man who gave himself to us as a meal that loss, death, emptiness, that hole that lives inside us, are not the answer. That this bread will somehow nourish us in this life and the next.

Today, I want to ask you.

Are you hungry?

What do you hunger for today?

As you think about it, grab yourself a huge chunk of something. Hopefully bread but maybe a muffin, maybe a pancake. Maybe take a huge bite of your sandwich, or a scoop of cereal, and just savour that mouthful just for a moment.

What are you hungry for?

What I love about Jesus saying "I am the bread of life" is that I have no option to say "oh can I have the diet option?" or "ooh none for me". I am given bread and I feast.

What I love about Jesus saying "I am the bread of life" is that as with all symbolic language we can pick it up and see what it means to us. And as author Lauren Winner says "to say that God is bread is to say something about variety and delight". Bread is not just about getting by, it is about enjoyment. She says:

“it is one of the beauties of this metaphor that bread, like the One who made the hands that made the bread, contains both: enjoyment and necessity , sustenance and pleasure.”

What I love about Jesus saying “I am the bread of life” is that when we have nothing left, or when we can’t summon the faith we feel we need, when we have no hope inside us, we can come to the table, either in prayer or in person, and hold out our hands. And we receive something else, and become something else, being remade by our feeding.

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Let us receive what we are, let us become what we receive.

The body of Christ.

Amen.