

## James writes...

*How do we find what really satisfies and sustains us?*



Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never thirst.' (*John 6. 35*)

Listen to these words from the poet Ernesto Cardenal on a hunger for God that is so often left unsatisfied:

'Every human being is born with love in his heart, he is born thirsty. 'My soul thirsts for thee like a parched land'. God created eating and drinking as material symbols of this love.

This thirst for God is the anxiety on all the faces of all the people walking in the street, going into shops, cinemas and bars. Everyone wants things, many things, an infinity of things: one more glass, one more sweet, one more look, one more word, one more kiss...

As Plato says, the human body is a cracked vase which cannot be filled. The senses may be surfeited with pleasures but the soul remains unsatisfied. Food fills us and wine excites us but they do not satisfy our deepest need.

And just as we realise how deep a well must be when we throw a stone in and do not hear it fall, we realise how deep our soul must be when things drop into it and disappear without us hearing them hit the bottom. Because God is in the depths of every soul, its depths are infinite and nothing can fill them but God.'

We live in a society obsessed with food and material security, but we know little of the things of the Spirit, where true sustenance comes from. So *John 6* (v 35, 41-51), the start of Jesus' discourse on the 'Bread of Life' has the potential to challenge and speak to us: to address that hunger which we know, deep down, to be true to our experience.

Let's look at the dynamic of this Gospel in more detail. The crowds come to Jesus, eager to meet with him after the drama of the feeding of 5,000. And in this passage we find three principle dialogues between the crowds and Jesus, each of which draws us deeper into the meaning of the whole:

Firstly it's Jesus who challenges them, as if questioning their real motivation for following him. It's as if what they're really concerned about is not the meaning of His signs, but filling their bellies! And I'm sure we can relate to that! Yes, of course, food is important, but how often we fail to look beyond physical sustenance (itself a good) to the things of the Spirit. 'Do not work for the food that perishes' Jesus says 'but for the food that endures for eternal life.'

Secondly it's the disciples that challenge Jesus, in an honest, but rather less helpful way. Ironically it's just after Jesus has given them a nugget of truth - that He is the

true source of life and all we have to do is believe in him – that their scepticism begins to kick in & they begin to ask what proof Jesus is going to give them, so that they can believe. How often our eyes remain firmly closed to the good things that God is doing, and our mind looks for reasons not to trust in God.

Then thirdly, Jesus leads the crowds onto another level, when he begins to explain that the true Bread from heaven (that he offers) is much greater than anything Moses came up with, and indeed He truly is the 'Bread of life' which 'comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' All we need to do - opening our eyes to His living presence - is to believe in Him and open our hearts to receive what he longs to give us.

Jesus takes his hearers on a journey, from the purely physical level to a deeper spiritual understanding: from the importance of created life – including thirst & hunger – to the even greater importance of eternal life, in-dwelling this world, in & through Christ: word made flesh.

One of the problems is - imbibing the assumptions of a materialistic age - that we easily misunderstand the relationship between the material and the spiritual; between the food that perishes and the food that endures to eternal life. And this leads us either to exalt the one and deny the other (to exalt food & the body, whilst denying the spiritual), or to deny one and exalt the other (no to food & the body, but yes to a rather disembodied spirituality). And our society has both extremes.

In reality the two are intimately bound up with each other and belong together. We need food and drink, only our diet doesn't end there, because we need the presence and word of Christ also: 'the food that endures to eternal life'. Healthy bodies, healthy minds, and vice versa. Jesus is not unconcerned with earthly bread, but allows this to be a sacrament, which points to its full meaning. Heaven and earth combine to give a foretaste of God's promised kingdom. Body, mind and spirit belong together as one.

So how do we find what truly satisfies and sustains us, and how are we helped by Jesus' words? If we read the Gospels we find that Jesus calls us to value and rejoice in the gifts of food and physical sustenance and to look after our body – not only as individuals, but what we might call today the body politic. He is concerned with the food that perishes, and ensuring that all are enabled to share in the bounty of creation. Why else would he have taken pity on the hungry crowds and fed them.

Jesus invites us to develop a right relationship with food and with all that exists, bodily, including all creatures and the created universe. Living holy lives means honouring and respecting the importance of the material world, and treating it and ourselves properly and without exploitation.

But Jesus also invites us (above all) to seek, in faith, a living relationship with Christ – the living word, the bread of life Himself – who alone satisfies our deepest needs. And we do this through prayer, through the words of the Bible ('bread for the journey'), through the bread & wine of our Eucharist, and through seeing all things with the wide opened eyes of faith.

'It is God's love that warms me in the sun and God's love that send the rain. It is God's love that feeds me in the bread I eat, and God's love that feeds me also by hunger... As we go about the world [may] everything we meet and see and hear and touch, plant in us something of heaven.' Teach us, Lord, to hunger for you, the true & living bread, which comes down from heaven and gives life to our world.