**Reading:** John 6: 24-35

**Sermon**

Our passage from John comes soon after one of the most famous stories of Jesus – the feeding of the 5000. The way John tells it, he ends that section with a rather chilling phrase - *Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*

The crowd refuse to leave him alone, and relentlessly pursue him – they are not easily deterred, despite Jesus escaping by walking on water, and they catch up with him here, all the way on the opposite side of the lake.

Are they hungry again? Does their insatiable appetite turn them into a mob? Did Jesus think, not again? Not already? You can’t be wanting more so soon.

The crowd ask Jesus a question: Rabbi, when did you come here? It’s one of those multi-layered questions– how did you slip away without us noticing? But also – how did you come to be? It’s a ‘who are you’ question. Jesus is someone who asks hundreds of questions throughout his ministry, has a few hundred asked of him, and only ever directly answers three of them. And he doesn’t answer this one. At least, not straight away.

Jesus is not interested in their consumerist approach to satisfaction – and he refuses to be the king they expect. He’s not going to be forced into behaving in a colonial, top-down, heavy-handed way, where power lies at the top, and those who are poor passively wait to receive the crumbs so generously left over once the rich have engorged themselves.

No, Jesus has shown himself to be a king of an entirely different nature. Who are you? I am bread.

I’m not convinced Jesus is irritating by the crowd, however tired he must feel – more that he is frustrated by the systems which keep them hungry for more. The systems of consumption and dependency.

People will always want more bread. In the feeding of the 5000 they are given a gift, and perhaps in this story we see how they misunderstand that gift as a handout. What happens when we give handouts without addressing underlying causes of poverty? It keeps people poor.

Jesus wants to provide more than a days bread – he wants to provide them with life. Not just the nuts and bolts essential for survival. But whatever they need to help them flourish. What Jesus provides is both practical and spiritual because he sees us as whole and complex beings who need more than just basic necessities, but who cannot enjoy the richness of the life God created if we are denied these necessities. This passage comes not longer after the conversation with that unnamed Samaritan woman seeking water and Jesus offers living water, knowing she’s parched.

Rev Helen Cameron, our new President of the Methodist Conference, said in her address to conference in June, *Justice is what love looks like in public*. She went on to challenge the way we operate connexionally – nationally – because Methodist churches in deprived areas are closing at a faster rate than in affluent ones. Why? Because if your church members are struggling to pay their rent, their utility bills, clothe their kids, they have no spare cash for what goes into the church offering, and that means those churches fail to pay their assessment – they money taken for circuit funds. And if those churches can’t pay their way, they are closed, despite how much the communities might need those churches. This is what is happening up and down our country. To our shame, Methodism is abandoning people in poverty.

Helen gave us one of the most challenging quotes I know – from the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, who is regarded to be the founder of the Latin American Liberation Theology movement – it’s a theology which holds the central belief in God’s preferential option for the poor. That God always sides with those in poverty. This is the quote Helen shared:

*You say you care about the poor? Then tell me, what are their names?*

Jesus knew their names. Do we?

Globally the places where Christianity is growing is in the southern hemisphere and an increasing number of Christians are those living in poverty. Without fetishising the poor, they have an important lesson to teach those of us who live with few money worries, and that is the need to trust God because whatever we have is from God and belongs to God. Those who are rich easily forget this, believing that wealth is the product of hard work, rewarding those who put in long hours, deleting God from the equation and living with a sense of entitlement. How easy it is for those who are rich, believing they deserve their wealth, to slip into the narrative that the poor equally deserve their poverty, that their lack of resources is the product of fecklessness.

If all things belong to God, God’s goodness is not something to be hoarded.

Historically the rich have entered other countries, asset-stripping them, acquiring more wealth, decimating those lands for generations. Who, generations later, begrudge any need for Foreign Aid, claiming charity begins at home, whilst with no sense of irony being equally critical of welfare benefits to the poor in their own countries. And their faith in God has changed them from being stewards of creation, to being dominators, and from there its only a hairs breadth away from becoming oppressors.

The story of God’s people of liberation from slavery reminds us of how those who were enslaved soon forgot the conditions they lived in, imagining their pots were always filled and forgetting their empty bellies and meagre rations they existed upon in Egypt consisting of leftovers and scraps. They grumble because having been reliant upon their overlords, they struggle to make the transition to be reliant upon God. And of course, when we read further on of the history of these people, we find the repeated phrase that God brought them out of Egypt into freedom, disappointed with how quickly they forget this, and in turn become oppressors to those who are poor.

And when we speak of oppressors in our own time, we have to acknowledge that might include us.

The poor know how fleeting bread can be. And money, and housing and employment and even friendship. Gone in a heartbeat. The rich live cushioned from disaster, forgetting that life can turn on a sixpence.

Of course the crowd are hungry again – they ate yesterday and are hungry again today. Their need for bread has resurfaced, and Jesus reminds them they should have the same hunger, the same need for God.

And then they demand a sign, proof that Jesus is sent by God. Bread is that sign. When Jesus says I am the bread of life, the bread is both bread *and* Jesus. That’s the essence of what we take at communion. The food Jesus offers isn’t perfect – the bread is broken, crumbs drop to the floor. It’s messy and mundane. Jesus subverts consumerism because we are only given enough. And that might be imperfect, and sometimes not what we would choose, in a culture which demands a dizzying array of choices from shampoo to hospital consultants.

Bread is a sign. But we are used to imbuing many ordinary things with significance greater that its substance. We take a cloth and stitch it and it becomes a flag some are willing to die for, and others get teary-eyed over at the Olympics. We take a piece of metal and shape it and wear it on our finger and it becomes part of the commitment we make to another person. We take paper, and design it, print something on it, and it becomes a note of the highest monetary value. We are used to altering the significance of ordinary things. Signs pointing to more than themselves.

God does the same with us. And when that happens we become a sign of Jesus, a sign of hope, a sign of justice – justice being the public display of love. In following Jesus we commit ourselves to addressing both physical and spiritual hunger. We can feed the poor a days bread, or we can seek longer term solutions in the knowledge no-one flourishes with an empty belly. Giving handouts keeps people poor, keeps them dependent, allows those who give to feel useful, but who quickly experience compassion fatigue because of the perpetual hunger of tomorrow.

I believe when we give our hearts to God, we are asked to acknowledge the transience of our own resources. Power is a word with much baggage, it’s become a problematic concept for churches and Christians as if having power is a bad thing. If we look at scripture God rarely asks those with power to step aside, but instead to understand how that power can be used, and scripture is uncompromising about those who use their power to line their own pockets.

Bread for a day maintains a power imbalance. Jesus seeks more than that for all of us. What would it be like for hunger to be eradicated? What potential amongst those in poverty would be released? Bread brings us together, forces us to share right now because when we hoard it goes stale. Bread bridges the gaps between us, meaning we have to acknowledge we are the same. Equally loved. Equally deserving of bread and satisfaction and flourishing lives, abundant lives. The riots we have watched with dismay over the past week are a denial we are the same, they are about division, a refusal to see that people with different experiences, different cultures have equal value. Rev John Hellyer, in his farewell service two weeks ago left us with an important message from his experiences of working amongst black majority churches in Birmingham, that immigration is nothing to be fearful of, that immigration brings huge benefits to us all. We damage creation when we insist on division, when we ignore discrimination, when we fail to use power to end hunger. Instead Jesus gives us a sign. An imperfect sign of brokenness. The broken bread is what can heal us and give us life, tasting and seeing that God is good. Amen