

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 15 August 2021

*Bread of heaven, you provide for our every need. You feed our bodies and our souls, yet we hunger to know and love you more and more. Nourish us with your Word today. Through Jesus Christ who is the living bread of heaven. Amen.*

John 6:51-58

***Eat this bread***

“Early one morning, for no earthly reason, Sara Miles, raised an atheist, wandered into a church, received communion, and found herself transformed – embracing a faith she’d once scorned. A lesbian left-wing journalist who’d covered revolutions around the world, Miles didn’t discover a religion that was about angels or good behaviour or piety; her faith cantered on real hunger, real food, and real bodies. Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled on the church’s altar to be given away. Within a few years, she and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city.” This is a book description titled *‘Take this bread: A radical conversion’* written by Sarah Miles. I read this book a few years ago while contemplating a way of outreach to people in the community, who may be indifferent to, and even scornful of what we have to offer – Jesus - the bread of heaven. The book was inspiring and gave me food for thoughts about the relationship between Holy Communion and the church’s mission in the world. Through the reading John 6:51-58, we’ll think about the meaning of eating the bread of heaven. Next, the word ‘to eat’ will give us an insight into a relationship with God. Lastly, we will explore our faith journey as feasting on the bread of heaven.

***Eating the bread of heaven – which way?***

Jesus’ statement about his flesh stirs up the crowd. They begin to express their confusion over how Jesus can give his flesh for them to eat. It is no wonder to hear them say, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Jesus is not kind to explain it in an understandable manner. Rather he promises that whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, the Son of Humanity, has eternal life now and will be raised up on the last day. While Jesus speaks to them from a spiritual dimension, the crowd can only respond to it based on their human experiences.

Eating the flesh of the Son of God is at the heart of John's understanding of the church. Faith and eternal life are possible only because "the word became flesh."<sup>1</sup> But how does the church receive life from that incarnation? How is it that we receive his incarnate life centuries later without direct experience of Jesus in the flesh? We may ask. To this, Jesus says, 'Eat my flesh and drink my blood.' That is, eternal life does not come through understanding correctly or believing the right things. Eternal life is being in close communion with Jesus. We take Christ's body and blood into our mouths, into our stomachs, into our bodies so that Christ remains in us and we remain in Christ. In doing so, we are as intimate with Jesus as the Father is with the Son. However, we are not talking about cannibalism here.

In scripture, eating is one of the expressions of receiving the word of God. In Ezekiel 3:3, Jeremiah 15:16 and Revelation 10:9, the prophets are told to eat the scroll. In doing so, they become the agents of God to do the will of God. As read in In Jeremiah 15:16, which reads, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts," the act of eating the word of God also sustains them with hope and joy.

By telling them to eat the living bread of heaven, Jesus tells his hearers of their absolute need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Humanity. The words 'flesh' and 'blood' point to the cross, where Jesus' flesh will be broken, and his blood will be spilled, when Jesus will totally give his whole self for the life of the world. Jesus' death on the cross may have remained as just a distant memory unless eating his flesh is actively exercised in our lives.

### ***Act of eating the bread of heaven***

In John verses 49-53, Jesus speaks about 'eating' the bread from heaven, using a very common word, 'to eat' (*esthio*). In verse 54, however, Jesus switches to a less common word, *trogo*. *It* is a rather onomatopoeic word with a connotation closer to 'munch' or 'gnaw.' It is a graphic word of noisy eating. But the audibility of the eating is not the main point here. It is eating that is urgent, even desperate. It is eating as though life depends on it because it does. Here we can see hints of the Eucharist in Jesus' words. For us who will come to the table, the connection seems obvious. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we participate in the promise that Jesus fulfilled on the cross. It seems we also participate in the violence by which that promise was

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:14

fulfilled - crunching with our teeth. Here the focus is on Jesus himself as the food of eternal life from the Father. Eating is also used as a metaphor for belief in Jesus. Jesus said in verse 35, where the one who comes to him and *believes* will not hunger or thirst, the ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’ of works as a reference to faith in Jesus.

### ***Faith Journey as feasting on the bread of heaven***

In our story time, we listened to a story titled *Sun Bread*. A baker brightens a bleak winter by baking a big golden Sun Bread, which lifts the spirits – and bodies of all who taste it, and even lures the real sun out of hiding. The baker was able to bake the Sun Bread because she remembered the sun as it was living in her. The living sun in the baker’s heart exuded through the Sun Bread. So those who tasted it were brightened too. To the question, ‘When they ate Sun Bread, what happened to them?’ We may answer that they were able to live with joy and happiness although it was still winter and the weather looked gloomy. It tells us the importance of Holy Communion that is in the heart of Christianity.

When the Jews first mentioned manna given by Moses, Jesus corrected them. It was not Moses who gave them bread, but God. Even though they ate manna from heaven, they died because they didn’t understand the truth in manna. Now the true bread from heaven came to the world with the promise of eternal life. It is a quality of life in God that will renew one’s life as a whole. Eternal life is obtained when we are in communion with the Father and the Son.<sup>2</sup> We celebrate Holy Communion as the proclamation of the truth of Christ, as a missional statement through which people can access to the table where the bread of life is abundant and the cup of wine overflows.

It is what Sarah Miles experienced at the church where she received her first communion bread. It is what the village folks in the story of Sun Bread experienced when the baker reproduced the sun that is living in her. We have living Christ in us. If so, how are we sharing living Christ Jesus with others? ... Together with Holy Communion, we are feasting on the bread of heaven through reading the scripture, prayer, Christian fellowship and many others. May God help us feasting on this bread of heaven, and sharing the living bread with others today and always. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:3

