

# Bread

## What links the Bread of Life to the House of Bread to challenge those who live without hunger?

What was the best thing before sliced bread? It's the question which always gets your panel show comedian a laugh. Sliced bread; mass produced staple food found in kids' lunch boxes and training day buffets all over the country.

Bread is not the most straight forward food to produce. The whole process of planting, waiting, harvesting, milling, mixing, kneading and baking is hardly self evident. Yet, over millennia it has become a basic food worldwide in all sorts of forms. It is used as a benchmark for poverty. The breadline marks out those who have enough through to plenty, from those who are struggling to survive on what they have.



Little surprise then, that stories about bread and the use of bread as a symbol are common in the Bible, in both the ancient texts and those from the time of Christ and the early church.

The saying attributed to Mark Twain, "*it's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand*" is a good maxim. There's a comment Jesus made in relation to bread that bothers me "*whoever comes to me will never go hungry*".<sup>1</sup>

On the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, he had a meal with his closest followers. It was an annual religious festival with all sorts of ritual around food and wine. At that meal Jesus broke from the prescribed ritual, took a loaf of bread, broke it, shared it among the disciples and told them "*This is my body broken for you do this in remembrance of me*".<sup>2</sup>

To avoid the really uncomfortable challenge that comment begins to open up, just get sidelined into a long discussion about whether the bread actually becomes Jesus' body when this is remembered and re-enacted in churches today. Then get further away from any real life changing conclusion by discussing whether wafers or bread are equally acceptable and what to do with the crumbs and leftovers.

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(1) John 6: 35-37 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. (NIV)

(2) Luke 22:19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (NIV)

Alternatively, consider that there was something important being set in motion. The reality of what happened to Jesus in the next twenty four hours after sharing that bread was that he was brutalised and executed. So the breaking of the bread and the words used have an obvious link with his death. However there's another way of interpreting what he said that has real consequences for the way we live day by day when some of the other things Jesus said about himself, using the symbolism of bread are borne in mind.

One time up in the north, on the side of the lake Galilee, a large crowd had flocked to see and hear Jesus. The afternoon had passed and as evening and darkness approached Jesus pointed out to his close friends that this crowd had nothing to eat. There were so many people that it would have been impossible to fund the provision of food for them all. Given the number of people, over five thousand all told, it's most unlikely that there would even have been enough spare food in the nearby villages to supply a meal for such a crowd. **A picnic for a multitude**  
The solution Jesus provided was to take one person's picnic sandwiches and miraculously produce from them enough food for everyone with plenty left over.

The following day a large number of these people met up with Jesus again after a series of ferry journeys across the lake. This time Jesus bluntly told the people who had come looking for him that he wasn't going to feed them and he spoke to them quite cryptically about food with an eternal shelf life.<sup>3</sup> This developed into a theological debate about the meaning of a story from the time of Moses about a miraculous provision of food. The tetchy exchange culminated with Jesus making an extraordinary claim for himself, that he was the Bread of Life and that those who came to him would never be hungry or thirsty and would not be turned away.<sup>4</sup> This provoked ill tempered banter during the course of which Jesus spoke plainly, with authority and developed his bread analogy further saying at one point, "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*"<sup>5</sup>

**What if he really meant it?** What Jesus meant by all he said on this occasion and the implications of it has kept theologians in business for generations and will continue to so. What if Jesus meant at least part of all this literally? What if there was a deliberate intention that those who heard then and we who read about it now, should consider a practical, physical outworking of this concept of bread that brings life for anyone who wants it provided from the Body of Christ?

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(3) John 6:26-27 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." (NIV)

(4) op cit

(5) John 6:51 (NIV)

Within a generation of the death of Jesus the number of those who believed in his teaching and resurrection had grown and newer groups of believers were springing up in many towns and cities in different countries. The stories about Jesus and his sayings were passed around by word of mouth and then in written forms along with letters from those who were becoming established as leaders and authorities in groups. Among those it is Paul who developed a concept that is now universally accepted amongst Christians, that the church can be understood as the Body of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

## Church with a capital B

Briefly put, the understanding is that those people who follow Christ (Christians) are all part of a global Church. This represents the Body of Christ on earth and it's through the Church that whatever Christ wants to be done is put into action. The head of this body is the risen Jesus Christ from whom the whole body (church) takes its instruction and direction.<sup>7</sup> The church meetings that Christians attend week by week in their own locality are small parts of that global Church regardless of any label or name that might differentiate them from each other.

Drawing all this together builds a real challenge to the Church globally, local church gatherings and individual Christians. If Jesus meant what he said, then his body is to be a source of provision for those who are hungry. Anyone who is hungry ought to be able to come to the Body of Christ and find food without being turned away.

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand people provides insight into how Jesus enables his followers, the church, the Body of Christ, to respond to this challenge. As the scale of the task became clear to Jesus' friends that afternoon by Lake Galilee, they were daunted and could not see how such a crowd could be fed. Jesus brought his skills in event management to the fore and set out a seating plan, bringing some order to bear. Then he gave thanks and started to share out the bread and fish.

The gospel does not tell us how this happened but rules some options out. It's clear that people did not form an orderly queue to receive a sandwich from the hands of Jesus himself.<sup>8</sup> Instead he delegated the handing out of fish and bread to his disciples. Consider that for a moment. The people were sitting in groups of fifties and hundreds, there were twelve guys to do the distribution, each one of whom

(6) 1 Corinthians 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (NIV) and Ephesians 4:11-13 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith... (NIV)

(7) Colossians 1:17-18 He [Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church... (NIV)

(8) Mark 6:41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all

could only carry a finite amount of food at any one time. If they had to keep going back to Jesus for another armful time and again, it would have taken getting on for an hour to feed everyone at the most conservative estimate:

- Assume just 5,000 people.<sup>9</sup>
- If these people sat in groups of 100, that would be 50 groups. The gospels say there were smaller groups as well (in fifties) so there were actually more groups.
- There were twelve disciples so let's assume they were all there.<sup>10</sup>
- 50 or more groups to be served by 12 men implies they had at least 4 groups each.
- It's not unreasonable to accept that one man could carry enough fish and bread for ten people, so each group of 100 would require 10 journeys back and forth to Jesus to get more food.
- That's at least forty journeys per person and it's ambitious to reckon each journey to fetch food and hand it out to ten people could be completed in a minute or so.
- The time taken to feed people in that way would have been at least three quarters of an hour, twice as long if there were the number of women and children some commentators believe possible.

## Do the maths

$$5000(+)/100 \text{ (or } 50) \geq 50/12 \geq 4 \times 10 \geq 40 \Rightarrow 3/4 \text{ hour}$$

The problem at the start of this story was all to do with time and the coming darkness. This miracle must have happened in a more time efficient way.

Another way to think about how this took place is to consider that each disciple was given a supply of fish and bread by Jesus and, as they then began to hand that out among the people, the supply in their hands kept multiplying. One man standing in front of a group of a hundred people cannot reach everyone. Those nearest him would have to pass food back to those in the middle of the group. The miraculous multiplication of food was taking place in their hands as they passed it around.

## You give them something to eat

Considering how this miracle took place is important in the light of the words of Jesus to his disciples right at the start "You give them something to eat"<sup>11</sup>

After five thousand or more had been fed, there were twelve tired and hungry disciples who picked up the leftovers. Serving as part of the Body of Christ does not guarantee a place at the front of the queue. It may well require effort and having to wait until the crowd has eaten before the leftovers are available.

(9)The gospels say 5,000 men. That does not include any women or children and there was at least one child, the one who provided the fish and bread.

(10)There are several Gospel stories that show disciples sometimes went off on their own or in pairs to do other things.

(11) Mark 6:37

When hungry people have been fed with bread and any leftovers have been collected, the task has just begun. Jesus quoted an ancient saying which opens up an even greater challenge. On one occasion when he was being put to the test, he reminded his tempter that people are not to live just by bread but by every word that has been spoken by God.<sup>12</sup> Whilst this was originally written in the context of keeping the law of God, Jesus used it in reference to the need for food when hungry.

## Bread is just the beginning

The Word of God is the same as the Bread of Life. The gospel writer John begins his book with a look back to the time before there was anything except God. In that context he described Jesus as the Word.<sup>13</sup> Describing Jesus as the Word and then later as the Bread of Life neatly ties two themes together. People will live when fed by the word that proceeds from God, that Word which is the Bread of Life.

As the gospel writer John is using the context of the story of the time of creation, another theme is drawn in to add even more depth. According to the Genesis account, everything that was created came into being as God spoke. God simply said let there be... and there was.<sup>14</sup> So, God's intention is that life is to be sustained by every word that comes from the mouth of God. The Word of God, the Bread of Life that feeds and satisfies the hungry along with the whole of creation is there to enrich the life of everyone, not just a few.

## Word and words are everything

Open access to God through the Word of God, the Bread of Life as represented by the Church as the Body of Christ is for everyone. This is made clear by the way another symbolic use of bread ties in with something that happened as Jesus was crucified.

For hundreds of years before Christ the Jewish people had a place as the focus for their religion. At the time of Moses and for a long while afterwards, this was an enclosure marked by tent walls, more like a fence. By the time of Jesus, this had become a temple built on a hill in Jerusalem. It was an imposing building and inside it there was a curtain separating the holiest place from the rest of the building. A special priest went into that holiest place just once each year and the presence of God was believed to be in that holiest place. Immediately in front of that curtain was a small table with some bread on it. The bread was ceremonially replaced each week.<sup>15</sup>

## everything for everyone

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(12) Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Matthew 4:4 quoting Deuteronomy 8:3

(13) John 1 1-5

(14) Genesis 1 throughout

(15) "Put the bread of the Presence on this table to be before me at all times." Exodus 25: 30

At the moment of the death of Jesus on the cross, the gospel writers record that the curtain in front of this holiest place was torn from top to bottom.<sup>16</sup>

The message is clear enough that the one who claimed to be the Bread of Life was, through his death, opening up direct access to God for everyone at any time, not just for a special priest once a year. The closest thing to the presence of God has previously been a bread offering. Now the final sacrifice of the Bread of Life was clearing the way for everyone to know God for themselves.

Right back in the time of the prophets, Micah announced that the one who was to come and rule, one who had his origins at the beginning of time, would be born in Bethlehem. Although it had been the birth place of the great king David, Bethlehem was a small insignificant place in many respects. The name, Bethlehem, means 'house of bread'. From the house of bread would come the Bread of Life.



The challenge for the church, the Body of Christ, is to be ready to feed those who are hungry. This will not happen without sacrifice. That body will experience being broken in order to accomplish this. At times, like the young boy in Galilee, there will be a challenge to hand over everything because it is needed even it seems too insignificant. There will be occasions when feeding the hungry seems impossible, too expensive, too time consuming; none of which will be reasons to give up. The church is the Body of Christ who, in a moment, can provide what it would take someone months to work for.

The church, the Body of Christ, is commissioned to be there for those who are hungry and to ensure that the whole breadth of creation is available to enrich the lives of everyone. After all, when Jesus used an allegory to illustrate how rich and enjoyable his Kingdom is; he did not set it out in terms of fish sandwiches for hungry people, but a wedding banquet. However, that's a whole new exploration into scripture for another time.

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(16) At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Matthew 27:51