

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 2nd August 2026

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Our reading today from St Matthew's Gospel is part of a wider cycle that's concerned with the theme of bread, food. Right through chapters 14 to 16 the theme of bread winds its way in and out of different stories. Indeed there are two feeding stories in this part of the Gospel, as well as various controversies and discussions over food.

In the Old Testament bread can be understood literally, as with the giving of the manna in the wilderness where God cared for his people Israel during their struggles and provided for them. But bread can also be seen in a metaphorical way. In this sense it signifies the wisdom that God gives for living through the Law, the Torah, and the spiritual depths God provides to satisfy the human heart in its deepest needs and longings. It comes to signify the covenant that God has made with his people Israel and to which he remains ever-faithful.

As our Old Testament reading makes clear, this gift of bread, of food, of wisdom and meaning and justice and covenant is given entirely freely. Unlike most other things we have or gain in our lives, this one is without charge: this, the most important and valuable gift of all, is entirely free of charge. 'Come to the water and drink if you are thirsty', says God in the reading from Isaiah.

And come and eat, says Jesus to the large crowd of needy and hungry people in Matthew's Gospel who've been with him all day. There's no charge for this meal, no cost to pay. It too is pure gift. Christ cares for these people in their clamouring hunger and needs just as God cares for his people Israel in the wilderness.

More than that. Christ gives up his own needs in order to care for theirs. We get a glimpse into the inner life of Jesus here. At the beginning of our story, he has just heard the news of the death of John the Baptist, murdered for having the courage to speak truth to power. Although the text is not explicit, it is implied that Jesus is deeply moved, perhaps even overwhelmed, by the news. He has a desperate need to be alone, he needs to be by himself.

So he sneaks off, gets into a boat and sails across the lake by himself to escape the crowds and the pressures of his ministry and even those closest to him. But he's unsuccessful. The moment his boat reaches land on the other side, a huge crowd comes to meet him. They've walked around on foot in pursuit of him, needy for his healing touch, for his acceptance and love and wisdom. But he doesn't push them away. He embraces them, his heart goes out to them. He cares for them body and soul. He provides for them, giving them healing and teaching and food. And he doesn't dismiss them until they're all fed, until they're satisfied.

In the next scene, you'll be relieved to know, Jesus does at last manage to get what he himself needs: solitude, time to be alone, time to be in communion with the Father, to pray, to deal with his grief at his friend John the Baptist's fate. He spends the whole night in prayer.

There's a strongly Eucharistic element in our Gospel story. Jesus *takes* the bread and *blesses* and *breaks* it, just as he will do at the Last Supper when he institutes the holy Eucharist. Here in the feeding story he gives the food to his disciples to *distribute* among the people. The scraps are carefully *gathered in* — and the irony is that there's more left over than there was to start with.

And that's just what we do when we celebrate the Eucharist together: we *take* the bread, we *bless* it, we *break* it, we *distribute* it and we reverently gather in the leftovers. But here Christ is not only the giver of bread but also the food itself: the one who fills our lives with meaning and consolation, with hope and love, through the giving of his own self in bread and wine, in his body and blood.

So what do we take from these readings? In the first place they reassure us that God takes seriously our needs, both physical and emotional and spiritual. God cares about us and our lives. The only qualification is to acknowledge our need. That's much easier to admit with physical nourishment than with other kinds. It's not so easy sometimes to admit a hunger for meaning, for

companionship, for love. Harder to admit our need for forgiveness and acceptance, for a sense of belonging and purpose. We can never be reminded too often that God knows our needs and cares for us and encourages us to name them before him. 1 Peter likewise encourages us to cast 'all our cares on him, for he care for you'.

At the same time, there's a whole world out there of human lives with inadequate purpose and meaning, lives that are sometimes empty of companionship. There are people who long to be fed, to be warm, to have a home and friendships, to find justice. We're called to go out and bring God's love and acceptance to those we encounter, especially the poor and needy, the excluded, the marginalised. We're sent to bring the gospel of Christ's healing love and acceptance and justice. We're also sent to recognise Christ in the poor and suffering and to see and name the signs of the Spirit already at work in our world. That's our mission.

Finally, our readings tell us that God himself in Christ knows what it means to be needy. Yes, God answers our needs and the needs of the world through us. But God has also experienced firsthand what it means to be needy, to be hungry and thirsty, to have profoundly human needs – sometimes for solitude but sometimes also for companionship as we find him at Gethsemane. God knows our needs, knows them from within and respond to them for each one of us, summoning us to go out and be bread for the hungry, justice for the oppressed; to become agents of belonging and welcome, offering meaning and community to the empty and the lonely.

The broken bread, which is Christ our Lord himself, is ours to receive at this altar, in all our needs and failings and longings. It's also ours to give beyond these walls to those who are needy and who long for God's bread, God's covenant love, God's justice.

Mthr Dorothy