

Hymns: 87 Praise to the Living God
728 O God, you search me and you know me
155 Come Holy Ghost
574 Because you have said
503 Love Divine

Readings: Exodus 16.2-4;9-15
Ephesians 4.1-16
John 6.24-35

“Dangers of a low carb spiritual diet”

Prayer – Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the word of my lips, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. AMEN.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”

Bread! Everyone wants it!

Israelites in the desert wilderness with Moses say they would prefer bread to freedom; the crowd with Jesus looks for signs and wonders through it. And the disciples, as we know having walked these several weeks with them this summer, the disciples want bread desperately and sometimes have it in abundance, but don’t understand it – and then forget to bring it when they are most hungry.

Bread! Everyone still wants it! Lack of it brings war, topples governments. The French protect its recipe and promote eating the bagette de ‘tradition’ as a patriotic duty, the Americans pack it full of sugar and air, and in Britain it is purchased by 99.8% of all households – 11 million loaves a day. That’s a statistical equivalent of 43 loaves per person per year. Have you had your share?

Bread. No accident Jesus describes himself as the bread of life. That gives life to the world.

And not just as an abstract metaphor – I am ‘LIKE’ bread, but as a proper and real sign – I AM BREAD.

That's important too, and very important – and just as mysterious now as it was then – such that by the end of John Chapter 6, everyone except the very closest ones who frankly had no where else to go had left Jesus, when he got specific – EAT THIS BREAD, FEED ON MY BODY.

Today we are not going to rehearse the theology of the real presence in the Eucharist, that's for another day – nor are we going to collapse the tension of Jesus' teaching – I AM BREAD. Not, 'like bread,' but BREAD.

Problem is, along with everyone else, I've been counselled these years into a low carb diet.

I am remembering when low carb became a 'thing' – for much of the world, of course, low carb is not a lifestyle choice, but a reality of life. Deprivation.

Such are the paradoxes of our world in relation to bread.

And I was reading a health magazine last week that came through our door, and it compared different diets – the one that seems most flash these days is the KETO diet, very low in carbs such as pasta and bread, moderate protein and high fat.

Friends, we should honour our bodies, which are a gift from God. We should feed them and care for them as well as we can, and that means balance and not too much, and not too little. The nurses and doctors among us can counsel us – and will, about how to manage our health.

But when it comes to our spiritual lives, friends a low carb diet is very dangerous. God gives bread – food – and promises to be bread. Eat the bread! Look at the example of the fearful Israelites in the wilderness and the crowd with Jesus, and be gentle with yourselves when you are fearful, or petulant, or looking for a sign. And then with them, eat the bread! Do not forego that which our God has given us, for our good nourishment! Bread of life!!

John Wesley preached on the 'means of grace.' In a time of great church change, and especially change in the traditional practices, worship, and gathering of the churches, he preached about the means, that is the practices, which would allow us to feed on God's grace.

Prayer, private and together. Hearing, reading, searching, studying, and meditating upon scripture. And The Lord's Supper. Fasting – I wonder, I think he might guide us towards fasting from social media, or worry, or grudges? And centrally,

Here are regular, ordinary means by which God intends to feed us this bread of life, says Wesley. I think he is still right. Not that they are the only means – 'Have a care to limit the Almighty,' Wesley counsels us – nor are we to make them ends in themselves, but to remember they are means only for conveying God's grace.

Of the Lord's Supper, he specifically talked about people who felt like they had to wait to eat until they felt themselves holy enough to eat. The qualification for communion, for Wesley,

was hunger. Not being filled. 'All who desire the increase of the grace of God, are to wait for it in the partaking of the Lord's Supper' To those who said 'I am impure,' for any reason, or who said 'I am too dirty,' or who said 'I don't have enough faith yet,' he responded: 'Who are you to disobey a direct command of Jesus?' he asks – Do this, in remembrance of me – eat this bread, drink this cup? Who are you to think you are unworthy, dirty, impure, lacking faith, or for any reason, when God has sent his only son and that son has called you companion – literally, one who breaks bread with me?

Eat the bread! Wesley says. Now, I note that his easy commands like that, while thrilling in their simplicity, can end up abusing those who are already pretty low on themselves. Or putting off someone who has been rejected by a church. Would that the politics of identity and community and table fellowship were as simple as Wesley made it.

Wesley was not one to understand the subtleties of low self esteem, or stigma, perhaps to understand how the particular way of his command might just pile another way to fall short on top of existing difficulty. I am remembering in the height of the fears about HIV, how many of us suddenly got frightened to share a cup. Abusing those who are fearful of presenting themselves for communion, or already carry stigma, is no means of grace.

But hear the clear call from this pulpit, over the centuries : eat the bread!! It is for you! Honour your hunger, not by argument and turning on one another, but by letting God feed you! Here is bread, and the bread of life!

Because for Wesley it was not just a warm fuzzy thing, to eat the bread, drink the cup. Essentially he says 'come, and handle with care – Honour your hunger for justice, for love, for all that is good and true by coming to this table, - come, eat! But expect that you may meet God.

There is a danger that we are too risk-averse in our own faith – that we choose a low carb spiritual diet not for our health, but for a hope that we can skate along at the edge of God's notice – when God says 'look I have skin in the game, if you come to this table, expect that you will too – you will be loved, you will be fed, you can expect to be changed.' Not into some holy robot, but more and more your self. Forgiven, loved, free.

There are dangers too if we adopt a safe, low carb spiritual diet, that we do not really connect with one another. That we smile and say hello to the people in our lives, but somehow remain removed from people?

Friends here is news – God has already noticed you. And smiles. Do not deny yourself the bread God offers. But expect that God shows up, and God feeds, and that your life will change.

Now, we've made much of grand conversion experiences – and fine if they come. But remember that most love shows itself in the habits of kindness and gentle thought that is our everyday. Bread is ordinary stuff. 11 million loaves a day? The change God makes in us need not feel like a mountain top or earthquake to be a change.

And I think the change shows first as a continued hunger – for the kind of life described in Ephesians 4, that we heard read. Growing up in Christ – being able to deal with whatever comes and be together in unity – glorying in each other’s gifts, not competing, not all trying to be one thing, but honouring the gift of God’s creation in each one in this wonderful, many sinew-ed and muscled body.

And I think the change shows by being increasingly unable to scapegoat, that is, losing the ability to blame and shame. The change shows by being increasingly, little by little unable to maintain easy well worn grievances nursed, or to walk past injustice when we see it. As we eat the bread, we will get more and more involved in the life of God, which means more and more involved in the life of the world, and in each other’s lives.

So whether you are someone who does diets or doesn’t, someone who counts calories or someone who keep s diet for reasons of health, or moral conviction, or someone who simply revels in that most perfect food – bread and butter, honour your hunger today. And come to the table.

Honour your hunger for the bread of life – for all that God may do in our lives. And celebrate Jesus here among us, companions at this table.