



Live-streamed worship
with Rev Val Reid
10.45am Sunday 1st August
*The hungry gap – what do we use
to fill the hole in the soul?*

John 6: 24-35

www.christchurchhitchin.org.uk/youtube

Leader: Val Reid

Reader: Jackie Hamilton

Music: Tom Nichol

Technology: John Hamblin

Call to worship

We come with our curiosity and questions.
We come seeking answers.
We are grateful for our daily bread,
but we yearn for the bread of eternal life.
Let us seek to be fed
and filled with God's life and love.
Amen.

Music [StF 513]

Take this moment, sign and space;
Take my friends around;
Here among us make the place
Where your love is found.

Take the time to call my name,
Take the time to mend
Who I am and what I've been,
All I've failed to tend.

Take the tiredness of my days,
Take my past regret,
Letting your forgiveness touch
All I can't forget.

Take the little child in me
Scared of growing old;
Help me here to find my worth
Made in God's own mould.

Take my talents, take my skills,
Take what's yet to be;
Let my life be yours, and yet
Let it still be me.

John L Bell and Graham Maule

Prayers

O God, giver of manna from heaven,
you provided for Moses' followers in the desert.
O Christ, bread of life,
you fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish.
O Holy Spirit of the living God,
here with us as we come together today,
we ask you to feed us with all that we need,
and that, thus fed, we might be satisfied.

Merciful God,
we thank you that you are to be trusted,
that you are faithful and provide for all our needs.
When we feel alone in the desert,
that is where we meet you.
In the wilderness of our lives,
we can turn to you and know that you will sustain us.
We worship you,
and we thank you that in you there is always hope.
Amen.

Reading – John 6: 24-35

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that

endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

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.’

Prayer of confession

Lord, when we fail to trust you in all things:

forgive us...

...and help us to trust you more.

When we complain that you have forsaken us,
you have left us, abandoned us:

forgive us...

...and help us to trust you more.

When we choose to go our own way
because your way doesn’t seem to make sense:

forgive us...

...and help us to trust you more.

When we don’t challenge injustice,
and instead, accept things as they are:

forgive us...

...and help us to trust you more.

When we keep asking for more signs,
more proof, more of everything:

forgive us...

...and help us to trust you more.

When we trust a little, then snatch it back:

forgive us...

...and help us to trust you more.

Music [StF 421 Kyrie Eleison]

Empty Broken Here I Stand,

Kyrie Eleison.

Touch Me With Your Healing Hand,

Kyrie Eleison.

Take My Arrogance And Pride,

Kyrie Eleison.

Wash Me In Your Mercy's Tide,

Kyrie Eleison.

Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

When My Faith Has All But Gone,

Give Me Strength To Carry On,

When My Dreams Have Turned To Dust,

In You, Oh Lord, I Put My Trust,

Kyrie Eleison...

When My Heart Is Cold As Ice,

Your Love Speaks Of Sacrifice,

Love That Sets The Captive Free,

Oh Pour Compassion Down On Me.

Kyrie Eleison...

You're The Voice That Calms My Fears,

You're The Laughter, Dries My Tears,

You're My Music, My Refrain,

Help Me Sing Your Song Again.

Kyrie Eleison...

Humble Heart Of Holiness,

Kiss Me With Your Tenderness,

Jesus, Faithful Friend And True,

All I Am I Give To You.

Kyrie Eleison...

Nick Haigh and Anita Haigh

Declaration of forgiveness

When we have not trusted God with our lives

and we have walked away,

we can always come back into God's everlasting arms,

knowing that we are loved and forgiven.

Amen.

Sermon

Pandemic weight gain is a thing.
I didn't need the internet to tell me that!
It's been my own experience.
And the experience of many of my friends.

Why?
Why am I living in COVID-friendly leggings?
Because I have been eating too much, obviously.

OK.
So why do I eat too much?
Well – I realise that a sermon is not the place for in-depth therapy.
But I do have some insight into my own experience.

The last eighteen months has been a difficult time.
Nearly all of our usual support structures have been taken away.
We weren't able to see our friends and our families for months.
Except perhaps outside with an anorak and an umbrella.
We haven't been able to come to church every Sunday.
Worship has become more of a spectator sport, and less of an immersive experience of God and our community.
We have missed holidays and outings and celebration meals and nights at the pub.
Those of us who used to work in offices have missed the water-cooler chat – we're perched on dining tables or beds with our laptops, conducting meetings on zoom.
No wonder we have turned to a bit of lockdown comfort-eating.

But if I'm honest, it's not just lockdown.
I've always eaten a bit too much.
Just as I've always worked a bit too much.
Perhaps the two are not unrelated.
Perhaps here is an insight into our 21st century condition.

We all have a gap inside.
A gap that needs to be filled.
And what do we fill it with?
Perhaps, like me, with food.
Perhaps, like me, by working too hard.
Being a workaholic is a way to reassure ourselves that we are needed.
That we are valued.
To assert our identity.

What other things fill that gap?
There are lots of coping strategies. Some healthy. Some less so.

We live in Hitchin.
It is full of lovely little shops.
A market.
Some very nice houses.
People fill that gap with property, with things, with nice clothes, with smart cars.

Before all the community activities at Christchurch closed down because of COVID, our church was a place where quite a lot of 12-step groups met.
Groups where people come to find help and support in facing their addictions.
Whether it's alcohol, drugs, gambling, dysfunctional relationships – there are many destructive ways to try to fill that gap.

In today's gospel reading, the crowds are looking for Jesus.
They are looking for him because he has performed a miracle.
Five thousand people have been fed from a small boy's picnic, and there are twelve baskets of scraps left over.

John tells us that after they had been fed, they were satisfied.
For once, that hungry gap inside had been filled.
The people had what they needed.
Bread – yes.
But perhaps something more significant.
A sense of meaning.
A sense of connection.
A sense of being in the presence of something bigger than themselves.

But John also tells us that Jesus had to slip away because the crowd wanted to take him by force to make him king.

I recognise that need to control, to cling on, to want security.
It's deep in our human DNA.
Eating too much, working too much – our addictions are partly about holding on to things that are within our own control.
Food – drink – money – things...
We have the power to satisfy ourselves.
Whenever we need it.

The crowd, in their conversation with Jesus, ask for a sign.
More bread.
Bread from heaven.
A sign like the manna which Moses provided in the wilderness.
On their long trek out of slavery and into the Promised Land.

Two thousand years before Freud, this is a fascinating Freudian slip.

Because we hear in the Exodus stories that the Israelites wanted to keep their manna.
They wanted to put it in jars and store it for a rainy day.
They wanted to be sure there would always be enough.

But Manna didn't work like that.
Manna arrived, fresh, every morning, as a gift from heaven.
From God, Jesus reminds them, not from Moses.

And the tense needs to be changed too.
Moses *gave* them bread.
But *it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.*

It is a continual act of giving.
Manna doesn't keep.
You have to trust that it will be there tomorrow.
Just as it was there yesterday.
It's a reminder that we are to depend not on food, not on our leaders, not on our own stockpiling, but on God.
Only God.
The people crowding round Jesus and asking for a sign say to him:
Sir, give us this bread always.
Guaranteed satisfaction.
Permanent fulfilment.
But Jesus makes it clear to them that this is not how God works.
I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Believing, in John's gospel, is not signing up to a creed.
It is not defining your doctrinal statement.
It's not deciding that there's only one way to interpret the Bible.
For John, *believing* means entering into a relationship.
Putting your faith not in the things we can control, the food we can store, the tasks that we do to make us feel good, but in the God who gives life.

So what is the antidote to our addictions?

Firstly, of course, the addiction will be different for each one of us.
But you will know – if you give yourself the space to stop and think – what it is that you turn to in order to fill that existential gap in your own life.
Food, alcohol, drugs are merely the most visible form of addiction.
Perhaps we are all addicted to our own habitual way of doing things, addicted to our own defence mechanisms, addicted to our patterns of thinking.

And this goes for us as a church, too.

And us as a society.

All groups are addicted to themselves.

Our group addictions are buried deep in our cultural assumptions.

They are often the hardest to notice, the hardest to name, and the hardest to heal.

Because we have created a co-dependency.

We have agreed, without actually saying it out loud, to be compulsive about the same things.

To be blind to the same problems.

That's why Jesus warned us about paying so much attention to the speck in someone else's eye, that we don't notice the log in our own eye.

Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous follow the 12-step programme.

First written down in 1938 by Bill Wilson, they were a one-step-at-a-time guide to finding a way out of addiction.

Step 1 of the Twelve steps is:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.

Noticing is the first step.

Recognising that existential gap.

Perhaps being willing to stop filling it for a while:

...stop over-eating,

...stop over-working,

...stop buying stuff,

...stop checking emails and Facebook and Twitter every few minutes

so that we can experience its shape, its contours, its feeling.

What is it like to be empty?

Perhaps that is why fasting was for so long a common practice in the church.

It's about creating a discipline in which we notice how dependent we usually are on the things we use to fill our emptiness.

As a church, perhaps we might stop clinging on to what we once were.

The last eighteen months has required us to let go of all the things that we used to think made Christchurch Christchurch.

All the activities which gave a shape and purpose to our lives.

What does it feel like to put them all down?

Willingly or unwillingly?

Who are we if we are not *that* church?

What is God giving us today?

What is God calling us to be tomorrow?

This is Step 2 of the Twelve Steps:

We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

In our gospel passage Jesus challenges the crowd to stop looking for bread.

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

This is the food that will satisfy.

Only God.

Only a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.

The whole of John's Gospel is an attempt to answer this question about what will really satisfy.

Jesus says:

I am the bread of life.

I am the living water.

But it takes 21 chapters to explore the richness of what Jesus is bringing.

And to explore the misunderstandings, the reluctance, the defensiveness of the people who want something simpler.

Something easier to control.

I remember as a Local Preacher on note, preaching my first sermon on the seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus.

I remember the look that came over the faces of the congregation as they realised I was going to take them through each one.

A seven point sermon!

Not this morning.

I just want to reflect on one particular thing that struck me this week, as I reflected on this lectionary passage.

It's about community.

The fifth of the 12 steps is this:

We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

We can't do this on our own.

If we don't share the problem with other human beings, we'll be struggling.

Being fed – receiving what will really satisfy – is a community activity.

It is a crowd of 5,000 that is fed by Jesus on the green grass of the hillside.

And it's interesting that today's reading is a conversation Jesus is having with the crowd.

It's not a one-to-one conversation with Peter.

Or Nicodemus.

Or the beloved disciple.

It's for everyone together.

What will satisfy – what will fill that gap – is a sense of belonging.

That's why people committed to breaking free of their addiction meet in anonymous groups to share with each other and support each other.

That's why early Methodists met in bands, and we still meet today in small groups, to share the life of faith. Over the last eighteen months small groups have been very creative in finding ways to stay together – on zoom, on Whatsapp, though phone calls and texts and chats on the doorstep.

That's why we are so much looking forward to finding ways to meet together to worship on Sunday mornings.

And to singing together again – even if it is still behind masks for a while.

Revd Pete Orton, at All Saints Church in Stevenage, runs a group called 'Hole in the Soul'.

It's based on the model of 12-step anonymous groups.

It's a place where people who feel a bit empty, a bit lost, can come and find company.

Last year, when we explored together as a congregation what we might do and be post-lockdown, this was a clear vision we had.

That Christchurch might be a community where people could come for sanctuary, for healing, for belonging.

Where the hole in the soul might be filled.

We are still working out how we can do this.

How we can be this.

But I am absolutely convinced that this is what Jesus offered then.

And it is what we – the body of Christ – are called to offer now.

Food that will satisfy.

Not an instant fix.

But a living, growing, changing community.

Where all of us might feel we belong.

Where God is to be encountered.

Where those who recognise their own emptiness might be filled.

Amen.

Reflection

I invite you to spend a couple of minutes thinking about what God might be saying to you today.

What do you use to fill the hole in the soul?

Is this a healthy coping strategy?

Where do you feel you belong?

Tom will play some quiet music as we reflect together...

Prayers for others

You are invited to take a piece of bread – or cake – or a biscuit – and to tear it up and share it with those you are with as we pray. If you are on your own, tear and share with yourself as you pray for others.

Generous and loving God,
we tear up violence
and share out peace.

We tear up fear
and share out joy.

We tear up poverty
and share our food.

We tear up cruelty
and share out kindness.

We tear up all that divides
and share our love for Jesus.
Amen.

Lord's prayer

Sending out prayer

As we seek to do what you want, Lord,
may we bring bread to the hungry –
food for bodies and food for souls,
strength for the journey, and hope for the future.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.

Music [StF 663]

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go, Lord, if you lead me,

I will hold your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord.

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord.

Daniel L. Schutte

*Prayers are taken from Roots for Churches 1.8.21
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