

Sermon one in a series of three. Preached by Rev'd Arwen Folkes 5/9/18

Exodus 16.2-4, 9-15, Psalm 78.23-29, Ephesians 4.1-16, John 6.24-35

May I speak in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

A few years ago I attended a midweek Eucharist at which a friend was acting as server. It was all very low key, so only the priest was robed and my friend stood there in the chancel in his jeans and t-shirt passing the vessels as they were needed. As I quietly watched I suddenly noticed that his t-shirt had a great big picture of Doctor Who's Tardis on it and it made me laugh to myself. The reason I laughed I realised that the t-shirt was probably theologically accurate ... just as the Tardis moves between past, present, and future, so does the Eucharist. Another friend calls it the 'timey-wimey' way the Eucharist simultaneously looks back, looks into the now, and looks into the future.

Over these next three Sundays we will hear three Gospels where Jesus talks about the Bread of Life. This only happens once every three years and it is a golden opportunity for us to explore some of what we understand by both the biblical and sacramental idea of 'bread', particularly the bread we receive in the Eucharist.

So, in line with my friend's tardis t-shirt ... I will offer a sermon each week on the past, the present, and the future of the Eucharist... the 'timey-wimey' way in which we are spoken to in this sacrament. All these will be published on the website so that you don't have to worry if you miss one.

Bread of Life: Past.

The Exodus reading that we heard earlier is one of the most important stories in the Jewish faith and, as we can see in Jesus' reference to it, it is part of our

inheritance as Christians. This story is read as part of every Seder meal during the time of Passover.

All the generations of a family gather together to remember a memory that didn't happen to them, but that shaped who they once were and are now. It is what's known as an act of corporate remembrance. We see something similar happening every year on November 11th. In this case, they remember that an Act of God provided their ancestors with sustenance, provision, and got them out of a rather sticky situation.

This was part of a far larger act of liberation and as we have heard today it involved bread or 'manna from heaven'.

The bible often involves bread.

In the books of Leviticus and Ezekiel we hear of bread as the staff of life. Bread is a key feature of religious ritual in Chronicles, Hebrews and in Genesis King Melchizedek, a priest of God, brings out brought out the bread and wine. Elsewhere we hear how 'showbread' is to be used in the Holy of Holies – known as the bread of the presence. In the first book of Kings, is one of my favourite stories, when the prophet Elijah flees for his life and enters the wilderness to wait on the Word of God. He sits there ready to die because life has taken such a difficult turn and in his waiting he falls asleep. An angel wakes him and he finds there beside his head ... freshly baked bread. These examples illustrates how bread is both used as a sign of God's gift and people's gift to God.

But, as well as a sign of ritual and presence, the Old Testament often uses bread as a sign of hospitality and community. The Exodus reading we heard points toward that,

the community are not just reassured but fed and strengthened by the manna from heaven and as a result they are able to carry on as a people.

These stories all point us towards the use of bread in the bible over thousands of years. They remind us of a long history of bread being used to signify important spiritual things but also practically to build and strengthen community.

The Church regularly hears and reads these stories in the Holy Scriptures and I am sure as I was running through these examples you will have remembered some of them because you have heard them in the past. That's what these stories do, they form in us a memory of our faith, and memory is a crucial point when thinking about bread of life in the past.

The beautiful thing to see is that Christ also held all these stories in his own memory. Whether remembered through his years of studying and reciting the scriptures, or whether because as God Incarnate, he was the one who used bread in this way. In remembering them we share in Christ's own memory.

There is something fantastic about sharing directly in the things Christ saw and knew. It draws us closer to him and his understanding.

Memory is a rather interesting concept. We all have a store in our own minds of all our individual echoes. Each of us has been uniquely formed by the stories of our own life. Sometimes those memories can bring joy, and sometimes they can be extremely painful. Sometimes they can be evoked by sounds, sights, smells ... even the smell of freshly baked bread. There are memories that make us smile and memories that make us shudder. And stood here as individuals not one of our memory banks will be matched by another. They are unique to us and in this we can find great treasure, or, sadly, great isolation.

But, in remembering these stories of our faith we are given a collective memory bank to share in. We are given another dimension that spans long before we were born and long after we will have departed. The memories of faith add another layer to our frame of reference and they sit alongside all those individual experiences. Even more, they give a new contrast to the things we experience. Because of them we can compare and reconcile our own temporal echoes to the echoes offered to us in eternity. They form us as a community.

I expect the smell of freshly baked bread evokes powerful and personal memories for some of us. There is something quite extraordinary about it. But the sight of bread here at the altar offers evocative memories of the whole biblical history. Of presence, of sustenance, of hospitality, of community, and of pure gift ... all wrapped up in the presence of God.

When Christ instituted the Last Supper, the Holy Communion that we will celebrate here today, he did so with this whole back story in mind. He must have known that the act of breaking bread in Communion would carry with it the memories passed down over meals, and fires, over tales told, and memories celebrated. He must have known the power of a shared memory from his own Jewish upbringing. And he marvellously took bread, broke it, and asked us to continue doing the same. A very physical and living history to share with him and with one another.

This is the Bread of Life past. And our Eucharist today encompasses all of this. It weaves it's way into our memory so that we may always remember that we are not alone – we are one with one other and one with God in a way that is thoroughly biblical and stretches back thousands and thousands of years.

Amen