

Trinity 11 2018 John 6: 35, 41-51.

Today's gospel is part of the lengthy "bread of life" discourse, which we heard about last Sunday and is the first of the seven I AM sayings in John's gospel, in which Jesus shows that he is the only way we can satisfy the hunger we have in our souls. Hunger is a powerful motivator. When we are physically hungry, we get something to eat. When we are spiritually hungry, we look for something to satisfy it. Just like there is physical food that can best be described as junk food, there is also spiritual food that can also be described as junk food. Take, for example, some TV evangelists, one of whom promotes the physical and material blessings you will receive if you order one of his prayer handkerchiefs!

We all suffer from spiritual hunger. We all hunger for something more in life. Some people try to satisfy their spiritual hunger through beauty, power, prestige, sex, drugs, alcohol or other worldly means. The world's way is the way to sorrow and despair. You only have to consider what happened to people such as Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse, Whitney Houston, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker to see what happens when people try to satisfy spiritual hunger by worldly means. Jim Bakker, the well-known TV evangelist lost his ministry and was sent to prison. Jimmy Swaggart lost his ministry in disgrace. I do not know if either of these promoted the "prayer handkerchiefs" but, sadly the others died from drug and/or alcohol abuse.

On the other hand, Jesus offers to fill us with his love. Only he can save our souls, change our tomorrows and grant us peace and joy for today. Jesus takes the initiative in our salvation, even if we confess him as our Lord and Saviour. He creates a longing within us. His love and presence and the difficulties he allows to enter into our lives force us to open up to him. Jesus takes the initiative if we choose to cooperate with him. That is the very definition of the Christian life.

God works in us to create spiritual hunger because he loves us and wants us to get to know him and love him in return. He uses the spiritual hunger to face up to our sin and convince us to turn to him.

There are parallels between the manna God gave to the Israelites in the desert and Jesus. The manna came at night, and Jesus comes into our spiritual darkness. Manna was God's gift to the Israelites, and Jesus is God's gift to us. All we have to do is claim it for ourselves, and we will never be spiritually

hungry again. The manna from heaven was associated in the minds of the Jews with the giving of divine teaching, and Jesus sees his own teaching as being just as essential as our daily bread.

We need to receive Jesus' spiritual food on a regular basis, just like the Israelites needed to receive the manna, and because they tired of a diet of manna, they were given quail from God every day. Without it, we will always be spiritually hungry. We can't get enough spiritual food by going to church only at Christmas or Easter or on special occasions such as weddings, funerals, baptisms or confirmations. This means regular attendance at Sunday services, particularly Holy Communion. That is why we have made the decision to admit children to Holy Communion prior to Confirmation, as we did last month here at St Mary's and that is why my predecessors made the switch from Mattins to Holy Communion as the main service of Sunday.

In order to live with Christ, we have to die to our worldly way of life and take up his life—a life of forgiveness, goodness, trust and service. If we are grounded in Christ's unconditional love, we are free to live like Jesus and love and serve others. It will not be easy, but God has drawn us to faith in him and that faith will sustain us. That is the real meaning of the expression "born again".

There is a legend about how, many years ago, there was an old man who used to walk the streets of Marseilles. He was called, "The Miser of Marseilles." He was an object of derision throughout the whole city and even throughout the south of France, for everybody seemed to know him. Apparently, he loved nothing and had no other object than to hoard every bit of money he got hold of; for what purpose, no one knew. He despised and mocked when he appeared on the streets. When he died, he was so despised that, only a single person attended his funeral. Then his Will was read and these were its strange terms:

*"From my infancy I noticed that the poor people of Marseilles had great difficulty in getting water. I noticed that water, the gift of God, was very dear and difficult to obtain and when they could get that water, it was not as pure and clean as God intended it to be. Therefore, I vowed before God that I would live but for one purpose, for one end. I would save money, money, money; that I might give it to the city on one condition: that an aqueduct be built to bring fresh, pure water from yonder lake in the hills to Marseilles. That I now make possible by leaving all my hoarded wealth to this city. This is my last will and testament."*

The people of Marseilles said;

*“Ah, when the miser died, we misunderstood him, but he did it all for us! We called him the miser of Marseilles, but he was more than that; he was the saviour of Marseilles.”*

If we could but learn the one real meaning of that story, we would know the secret of how to get the most out of life, which is to give the most to life. Just as they knew, finally, of the miser’s giving so the world should know of Christ’s selflessness and love that He gave himself on the Cross for us to be saved.

The same was true with Peter and the disciples in the early church post-Pentecost period. John Pritchard, a former Bishop of Oxford of whom I am personally not a great fan, has written;

*“The aristocratic Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, so they did not believe in the power of a dead “messiah” to heal. Annas, Caiaphas (they were the religious establishment figures of the time) and the others did not want the delicate political, social and economic relationships in Jerusalem to be jeopardized because they were top of the pile. So this claim of resurrection and the healing of the sick and the lame had to be faced head on. Here we see Peter, the head disciple, almost unrecognizable from the defeated deny-er of Jesus who avoided the crucifixion and then skulked through the streets of Jerusalem trying to avoid a similar fate. Here he is a confident, care-free Peter challenging these pious authorities with the crime of crucifying Jesus, the stone they had rejected but who is in fact the cornerstone of a new world. What made the difference? The resurrection and the Holy Spirit.”*

Are we beginning to get the message, or are we like those people who lived in Marseilles at the time of the miser and don’t really see what is happening around us?

Amen.