Tidenham 5/10/25 – Harvest Thanksgiving

**John 6: 35 – I am the Bread of Life**

Prayer

It wasn’t hard to predict that at some stage this morning we would have *We plough the fields and scatter* – will we sing lustily or a little wearily? Anna will tell you I’m much more a townie than a country boy, and I’ve not ploughed any fields ever or done much scattering either, come to that, but I know others have and like all of us here I’ve enjoyed the results. And singing the harvest hymns does make that connection. Harvest is a time for making connections – between the food we eat, the work of a whole chain of people between fields and shelves in the shop, and the great truth behind it all that God has graciously provided for us.

I wonder what comes to mind when I say *Bread*? A hot crusty loaf perhaps? Or bread and water – a minimal diet? Go to different places and we find different answers. In Uganda bread is seen an expensive luxury. Only the wealthy can buy and eat bread. If we look at our reading from John 6 we see people making different connections. Our reading follows on directly from the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Jesus knows that he is popular because he has just fed the crowd miraculously. Free food in a deserted place - bread and fish, a poor person’s picnic maybe, but it’s free and filling.

But Scripture invites us to move on from just seeing it as a story about feeding the otherwise hungry. Jesus invited people to make a connection, to jump beyond the material, what they can see and eat – to think about the spiritual. The material points to the spiritual, but Jesus’s listeners didn’t quite get that. They made a different connection. Jesus providing them with bread and fish reminded them of Moses who provided food for their ancestors long ago in the desert. Remember the people of Israel after the Exodus, the great escape from Egypt, how they wandered in the Sinai peninsula and were hungry, and Moses provided them with food they called *manna*, literally – *what’s that?* They thought of it as bread from heaven. Jesus picks this up, reminding them that it was God, not Moses, who had provided the food. Moses was just his instrument. We read how Jesus went on to talk about *the true bread from heaven that gives life to the world*. And people said, *Sir, give us this bread always*. It’s hard to know what they were thinking about – food always available? Were they winding Jesus up? Or saying something for the sake of saying something. Probably we have all been there. But this led Jesus to say, *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* I find it fascinating to notice that so many of Jesus’ big sayings – like this, *I am the bread of life* come at the point when his hearers are floundering. Have a look through John’s Gospel and see if that’s fair.

Harvest Thanksgiving – it’s certainly a moment to thank God for his gracious provision – we ‘re blessed with more than Balloo in the *Jungle Book* called the *bare necessities of life.* We have enough and probably more. Simply to have it is the invitation to share it. There’s plenty of discussion to be had about *how* – whether through the tax system or philanthropic giving or both in some combination - is up for grabs. But the basic point is clear. God is generous to us and he expects us to be generous to others. We can’t spiritualise this. As we thank God for his goodness to us, that does have implications for our lifestyle and our budgets.

It's not either/or – physical and material or spiritual. It’s both. Jesus said, *I am the bread of life*. In Uganda where I was teaching in a theological college we had students from all over the country, and I loved going to visit students in their home dioceses. In some places there was incredible poverty – I’m thinking of a refugee camp where people’s shelter was black plastic sheeting hung from tree branches and whose water came from trucks where they queued with their jerrycans, except many of the youngsters went down to a stream and drank not knowing what others had been doing in or around the water upstream. I remember clearly that people were asking us for – Bibles. That wasn’t the only occasion when I had to learn the lesson that it is often people who are poor in this world’s goods who can remind us most clearly about what matters. Nothing new there – on more than one occasion Jesus reminded people how easy it is to be materially rich and spiritually blind.

Now I don’t want to go off now on some nostalgia trip about the good old days when community meant something and the old values and so on. We know that line, and it’s interesting to note that Jesus never went there. He threw in the line, *I am the bread of life*. And he invited people to come to him and believe in him and trust him. At which point it is entirely irrelevant whether we have too much or too little. It’s just if you don’t have too much, it’s actually easier to see Jesus’ point. And that point is that we all need Jesus if we are to live spiritually, just as we need bread and water to live physically. Correspondingly just as food and drink satisfies our physical hunger and thirst, so Jesus is the one who satisfies our spiritual hunger and thirst. And when we come up in a few moments for Communion we come with empty hands, whether we are rich or poor, comfortable or troubled, privileged or struggling – with empty hands.

Now these are not easy times. We’ve had another setback, disappointment with the process of finding a Vicar. Meanwhile there’s a lot of uncertainty. Canterbury…? The world situation is looking grim – we hardly need reminding. It can be tempting just to batten down the hatches and become more inward-looking. But let’s not. You know in our community how we can best share our resources and all good gifts around us. But let’s also take the good news of Jesus, we might want to translate that he is the bread of life into more contemporary language, but the invitation is the same to know him and trust him. That’s pretty challenging in a fairly hostile environment. But first come and be fed – the bread and the wine, received in faith, is strength, spiritual food for the journey and the challenges of this week and beyond – freely given and given to be shared with others.

Prayer