

Storms and Picnics Week 4

Sermon



Francis Hoyland's Holy communion predella, our picture for this week, is full of the life of his family, ordinary and extraordinary. It pictures birth and death, baptism and communion and ordinary family meal times.

It's full of family in other ways as well: he tells the story of how his 2 year old son ran his fingers through the paint saying "Look daddy, tram lines!"

The whole of the picture resounds with the relationships, and loves of family life in all its joys and ease, its sorrows and pressures. Its reflection on holy communion seems completely grounded in the stuff of being human:

The bread of life becomes the loaf sliced for tea and the cup of salvation the child's beaker of milk or juice from which he is helped to drink by his mother.

It is striking in its ordinariness - a meal repeated countless times in countless families, each showing God's grace.

How does that make you feel?

Are you comforted by the use of the ordinary to show and reflect on communion?

Do you worry that such an image might debase communion, making it too ordinary, removing its specialness, its power?

Is this part of what Jesus' listeners find so scandalous?

- The ordinariness of the incarnation
- the boy whose parents they know talking about bread from heaven?
- Is the sign that they are craving a miraculous appearance of heavenly food rather than bread broken by the hands of a neighbour becoming enough to fill them with abundance?
- do they want a returning Elijah in fiery chariot rather than the neighbour's boy in stained travel clothes as their messiah?

The Bible is full of people longing for the miraculous and scandalised when it comes in an ordinary package.

- Remember Naaman ill with leprosy, longing for healing, who is disgusted when all he is asked to do is to wash in the river.

We seem to have a longing for miracles to come with glitz and glamour rather than in a wash in a muddy stream and human hands breaking ordinary bread.

It is this scandal which is at the heart of the incarnation, of God's life in Jesus, which the crowd are now faced with. At the end of the passage we read last week the crowd cried out 'Sir, give us this bread always.'

Their longing to be fed by God is real. It is a longing for physical food in a land where food was scarce and hunger commonplace. But it is also a longing for much more: for abundant life in God. To be fulfilled as well as filled.

I wonder what they were expecting to happen next...
a clap of thunder?
manna falling from the skies?
the appearance of some sort of holy vending machine providing a
food of their choice at a time of their choice?

Instead Jesus's words resound with God's promise in Isaiah.
the short quote (45 It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be
taught by God.") points us back to the entire passage from which it
comes -

- a passage which talks of God teaching and holding the people
safe
- a passage first spoken in exile and oppression to remind the
people that God was with them even then
- a passage now spoken to people in an occupied state

If you read on a little in Isaiah from Jesus's short quote you will find
an amazing promise of plenty and fulfilment.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your
labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich
food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

As Jesus talks of himself saying

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this
bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the
world is my flesh.

We can hear Isaiah's promise echoing behind his words. A promise
made in one time of oppression fulfilled in another.

And all that is needed is belief - not in the sense of the saying of a creed or acceptance of some form of doctrine but in the acceptance of a piece of bread from a neighbour's son who is himself the bread of life - and through the eating to be drawn into God's life.

In her book, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, Sara Miles writes

It took actually eating a piece of bread - a simple chunk of wheat and yeast and water - to pull those layers of meaning together: to make food both absolutely itself and a sign pointing to something bigger. It turned out that the prerequisite for conversion wasn't knowing how to behave in a church, or having a religious vocabulary or an a priori "belief" in an abstract set of propositions: It was hunger, the same hunger I'd always carried."

Like Jesus's listeners we are asked if we too feel that hunger. We are invited to receive bread and life in all its fulness.