

Personal service 25 July 2021



Communion Calypso

Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a sound of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

*Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound!*

Christ is able to make us one,
at the table he set the tone,
teaching people to live to bless,
love in word and in deed express.

Chorus

Jesus calls us in – sends us out
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share:
God (Immanuel!) everywhere

Chorus

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StF 34/ HP 505 / MP 529 O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Prayer of approach and confession:

God of love, your presence surrounds us in every moment of our lives, in every breath we take. Help us to be still, to relax, allowing you to hold our anxieties and our cares.

We thank you that you are concerned with every detail of our lives; you come to us in the activities of each day. Help us to be present to you.

We confess that we are often governed by fear and insecurity; we do not truly see the need of the other person, but instead pursue our own interests. God,

forgive us, renew us, make us whole, that we may love and serve you and our neighbour. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Ephesians 3: 14 – 21

John 6: 1 – 21

StF 252/ HP 137 / MP 384 Jesus the Lord said 'I am the Bread'

Reflection:

The pandemic experience has shown us something about ourselves as a society, and about the modern world and the way it works. It has shown up the world's inequalities, and the way the rich countries tend to grab hold of the goodies they want, often at the expense of the poor of the world. It seems, however, that our society is not necessarily happy, and the causes of this can be debated at length, but is there some connection between the target-driven culture and people not experiencing contentment?

The notion of value for money is a crude tool for measuring the worth of policies to promote justice and equality, and general well-being. If we reduce everything to a financial cause and effect calculation, we have lost sight of an important part of what motivates us, what undergirds our humanity.

What the bible refers to as grace is something that is given freely – it has no cash valuation. God's grace is something undeserved, something we can't pay for. The generosity of God's love is shown in Jesus, who gives himself for the life of the world, and satisfies the deep hungers of humanity.

Bread features large in the bible, especially in John's gospel. It is a symbol for what keeps human beings alive in all senses, and it describes what God gives and the way of giving. The supply of manna in the wilderness in Exodus is God's response to the people's physical hunger, but it also gives them a lesson about trusting in God's providing, and raises the broader question of what really satisfies.

Of all the gospel writers John uses the image of bread most to show us who Jesus is – the bread of life. In the gospel reading, he sets the scene for the feeding miracle: a large crowd followed him because they had seen Jesus healing the sick. He goes up the mountain with his disciples – echoes of Moses the lawgiver. We are told that the Passover was near – there is the association with the Passover lambs being slaughtered, and also the great liberation of the Israelites from Egypt (and also probably a reminder of the eucharist for John's early readers). In v.5 Jesus asks Philip where they are to find bread for the people to eat. The question is really 'Where is the true bread?' Jesus poses the question as a way into a discourse on himself as

the true bread which gives us all we need. John was probably familiar with both Mark's versions of the story; he seems to regard the feeding miracle as a recollection of an actual event in Jesus' ministry. It is also a miracle, and if we try to find physical explanations, we get further away from what John is wanting his readers to engage with. The trouble is, neither the disciples nor the crowd have any conception of an 'economy of grace'. The disciples take the view that you pay £X and get Y loaves – that's the real world. On the other hand, the crowd welcome someone who will give them a free lunch, heal the sick, etc, as though Jesus is there simply to meet all their needs – 'Make him king, then we've got him under control!' – a misguided reaction to the demonstration of God's grace expressed through bread and fish.

The difficulty is that they are all hungry, but they don't realise what sort of hunger it is. What they don't see is that God's grace works through cooperative effort. It requires us to let go of our strategies of self-protection, our instant cost-benefit analyses. The story of the miraculous feeding asks us to recognise that the raw materials for acting out the kingdom of God are always present around us. We are invited to engage with whatever, and whoever, is to hand. Jesus used the loaves and fish that were available, gave thanks, as any Jew would, and distributed them. What those who received the bread and fish on that occasion refused to grasp, was that the bread points to the limitless commitment of God in love to them and to us. To receive is to allow ourselves little by little to be changed. Jesus is the one who will transform our expectations, if we let him. Our difficulty in receiving is a deep fear that we are not loveable, not good enough. In the final chapter of John's gospel, we have the breakfast on the beach. Once more, Jesus is the host, once more there is bread and fish, the fish being the contribution of the fishermen-disciples (trainee leaders) who have caught nothing during the night, but then rediscover the gracious providing of God, when they remember to trust once more.

The feeding of the five thousand is followed by a miraculous appearance of Jesus to the disciples, walking on the water, in the darkness of the night, the darkness of their fear. 'It is I', the voice of reassurance and encouragement.

What can a story like this, which is apparently about the miraculous and extraordinary, have to say to a community of Christians in a church? Jesus shows people how to be human, how to face our true hunger – then the grace of God becomes real. Perhaps the main calling of a local church is to be a gracious community, to practise hospitality, to model a way of living that honours people as themselves, rather than the other way which says you have to earn your place, which we can never do. Abundance isn't about money or talent, it's about love and commitment.

StF 465 / HP 437 / MP 201 Guide me, o thou great Jehovah

Prayers of intercession:

Loving God, we pray today for the Church worldwide, especially where Christians live with persecution and danger, for Christians in the Middle East, and the most ancient Christian communities in Egypt, Iraq, Syria.

We pray for the Church in Britain, for new and life-giving ventures in community, for works of social justice and the strengthening of bonds of care and love. We give thanks for the recent gathering of the Methodist Conference, for its deliberations, and for the new President and vice-President and those who guide the Church. We pray for our own circuit and those who lead it.

We pray for people of other faiths, and for all fruitful relationships and deeper understanding that is going on, for new ways of working together.

We pray for migrants and refugees, for all who seek escape from conflict, from oppression, from poverty and fear. We offer our prayer for all who are subject to racism and exclusion on account of who they are or the colour of their skin.

God of love, you know our desires, our needs, our longings, guide us as we try to use your gift of life in generous service and concern for the good of others.

We remember before you all those known to us who are sick, sorrowing or anxious.

We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing:

The Lord who conquered darkness with light, give peace to you.

The Lord who conquered death with life, give peace to you.

The Lord who conquered loneliness with love, give peace to you. Amen.

David Adam, The Open Gate – Celtic Prayers for Growing Spiritually, 1999