

11 after Trinity- Proper 14: 12 August 2018
(1 Kings 19: 4-8; Ephesians 4: 25-5: 2; John 6: 35, 41-51)

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father,
Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

There has been much discussion in recent years about whether there is life on Mars, and what the requirements are for life to exist. Water is always mentioned, and we know that life on earth would not be possible without the light and heat of the sun. But long before scientists understood the significance of light and water to the creation of life, the writers of the various books of the Bible wrote about this, starting with the story of creation in Genesis. And in the New Testament light and water are used symbolically to describe Christ and his work. In the Gospel of John, in particular, both are used repeatedly as symbols of Christ.

Light and water are certainly essential to us as humans, but we also need another source of energy in the form of food. In the wilderness the people of Israel complained to Moses that they were starving, and God fed them with the bread of Heaven, known as 'manna'. It was this bread that saved the exiles before they reached the Promised Land. And in an echo of this, John's Gospel describes Christ in a way that emphasises that he is equally essential to human life. We cannot exist without light, water or food; and John is showing us that we cannot exist without Christ.

But there is a big difference. Jesus reminds his listeners that their ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and died; but the bread that Jesus is offering to them will be different and will enable them to live for ever. He is essential to our life, now and for eternity.

So, at the start of today's reading Jesus describes himself as 'the bread of life', but he goes on to say: 'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' So although he is referring directly only to being the bread of life, he is indirectly reminding his listeners that he is also the water of life. John here refers back to Jesus's earlier encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, when he offered her water that would quench her thirst for ever. Food and drink, bread and water, are staples of human life; we cannot exist without them. Jesus is a staple of our Christian life; we cannot exist without him.

And Jesus wants his audience to understand the full significance of what he is saying. In speaking of himself as the bread of life and the bread of heaven, he is telling them who he is and about his relationship to God. But his

audience does not want to hear this message from this local man they have known since childhood, who they think is no better than they are. They complain that he is setting himself above them: Who does this man think he is? We know his mother and his father, Joseph. He is only the son of the local carpenter.

It is not clear why John refers to those who are saying this as 'the Jews' since all the people who are present including Jesus himself are Jews, so it hardly helps us to understand the situation, and it would certainly have been better if John had not used this term, in view of the subsequent history of antisemitism, still very much present in our community and in the news today, sad to say.

What Jesus is trying to make clear to this complaining crowd is that he is the Son of God and that it is only by God's choice that they will be given eternal life. And that is his lesson to us too. But that does not mean that our destiny is already decided by God and that we have no part to play. Far from it. Each of us has a choice to make. Jesus goes on to say: 'Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me...Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.' If we choose to believe, we will be with Christ for eternity.

At the beginning of John's Gospel, God is described as the Word, and Jesus is described as the Word made flesh. And Christ rejects the temptation by the devil in the wilderness, as recounted in Matthew's and Luke's Gospel, to turn stone into bread, because he knows that humans do not live by bread alone but by the word of God. In his

teaching here, Jesus is reminding us that we come to a relationship with God through studying his word: 'It is written in the prophets, "And they shall be taught by God."'

It is important that we study the Bible and read God's word, but ultimately that is not enough. The Christian faith is about our **relationship with God**. Jesus is the Word of God, and it is not by study that we become disciples of Christ. Jesus did not invite his disciples to sign up to a course of study; he called on them to follow him and live with him, and that is what he calls us to do.

In our Old Testament reading we see Elijah, full of despair, being reinvigorated and given new courage and purpose by the spiritual food provided by an angel. That same spiritual food is offered to us, to allow us, in Paul's

words, to be 'imitators of God'. We know that God is love and that he loves us all. We know that God is merciful and that he wants us to love him. All that he asks is that we accept his love and that we recognise Jesus as his son and the source of eternal life: Jesus is the bread of life and the bread of heaven; he is our spiritual food.

Amen