

John 6:1-40

Finest Bread Free – but only from one place

There's nothing quite like a bargain is there? You know that sense you get sometimes that you have discovered a deal that is just fantastic value. The 10p flight to the Med including taxes. The secondhand car for well below the value in Parkers' price guide. The 80% off Louis Vuitton bag. The free ticket to the football. Even bargain fruit and veg at the end of the evening at Asda.

We love bargains. Because, in general in our world, the rule that applies is that you get what you pay for. If it's cheap it's probably not that good. So to get something which really is good for not very much – well that's worth celebrating.

That is probably pretty much how the people who benefited from Jesus amazing miracle of multiplying one lunch box worth of food into a super sized meal for at least 5,000 people felt.

Imagine the situation with me for a moment. There you are – turned out to hear one of the greatest preachers of the age. You've walked for miles to hear this man because of his reputation for stunning clarity, his great miracles and his anti-establishment streak.

It's coming up to Passover – the biggest celebration of the Jewish year and time of massively heightened nationalism and awareness of your identity as a country. A time when you celebrated being liberated from foreign oppression all those years ago in Egypt and hope for a liberator from the hated Roman dictatorship that now rules your land through a puppet government.

So you trek miles through the scrubland to hear Jesus of Nazareth. But by the time you arrive at the distant and solitary place in the desert that Jesus has chosen it's already dinnertime. No one was planning to be out this long. Jesus and his disciples weren't planning to be mass catering. It's a disaster. The ancient equivalent of £15,000 wouldn't have provided an Asda smart price sandwich for each of these people.

But then, as calmly as you like Jesus produces a top notch meal for the crowds and has more food left over than he started off with! Just like Moses feeding the people of Israel on their desert journey all those centuries earlier with bread and quail miraculously from heaven.

Well this is a result isn't it. If you're a Jew under Roman occupation, and certainly if you're the kind of Jew who follows a poor itinerant preacher around you are almost certainly poor. Poorer than most of us can even begin to imagine. As poor as the people around the world who live on a couple of dollars a day. So poor that the food you eat takes up the vast majority of your daily earnings.

What an amazing bargain following Jesus looks like being. If Jesus will feed you and your family every day how much better would everything be? Your worries would be calmed. You could spend all that extra income that was freed up on your children's education. On buying a cow to start a little milk and beef business. On building an extension to give your home a second room. This is the

most amazing turn around in your life ever. Jesus provides for me. What an amazing thing.

It's no wonder that when Jesus disappears off the scene everybody is out looking for him. They chase him all the way back round to the other side of the sea of Galilee and track him down to the synagogue.

The crowd are puzzled by the manner of Jesus arrival in Capernaum – they haven't realised that Jesus, like Moses, not only supervised the miraculous provision of food but finds seas no barrier to dry passage.

But Jesus is not interested in their mode of travel questions. He is concerned about their motivation for looking for him at all.

Sure they know that he can do miracles. Sure that's why they are chasing after him. But, Jesus says, they haven't really understood the sign. They don't get what it's pointing too.

As far as the crowd are concerned this is all about bread, a point that comes out all too clearly in the verses that follow. But as far as Jesus is concerned there is something much more important for them, and us, to understand. The most important thing in the world is not the kind of bread the crowd are after. The most important thing in the world is the kind of bread that Jesus is really offering – the bread to which the miraculous feeding the day before was just a pointer.

I **Jesus' bread doesn't go mouldy (v25-27)**

The trouble with most of our bargains, even the really good ones, is that they don't last long. The food gets eaten. The clothes wear out or date. The car packs in. The holiday is over. The toys break. The games console is superseded by the next generation. The stuff you go to work to pay for – the house, the car, the electronic stuff, the furniture, the books and DVDs, the holidays and meals out and everything else. It all spoils.

Now Jesus isn't being anti-food here. As far as we know he and his disciples tucked into the bread and fish as enthusiastically as anyone else. We know from the accounts of his life that Jesus enjoyed a good time to the extent that the religious leaders of his day accused him of being some sort of party animal – hanging around with the big eaters and big drinkers.

What Jesus warns the crowd against is not enjoying things that spoil. It's working for them. Putting your whole life into them. Investing your heart and soul into them. And the reason Jesus warns about that isn't that he wants us to be miserable.

Jesus isn't trying to deny the crowds something that will make them truly happy and fulfilled. He's trying to stop them wasting their lives.

Jesus is telling them that you simply cannot invest your life in two things at the same time. It's a big theme in his teaching – especially in relation to possessions, wealth and food. As he puts it elsewhere – *you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money* (for which read God and anything!).

In our church I think that the biggest thing competing in our hearts for attention with God. The biggest loaf of bread that will rot and go mouldy is probably **work itself**. Or, rather, the prestige from others or self-affirmation that certain careers bring with them.

I know there are people in our church whose perception of how their Christian life is going is directly dependent on their perception of how their studies or career are going. And I am sure that there are many more people for whom that is true but I don't know about it!

There are people here today who are killing yourselves, exerting every drop of energy to get a class or degree you're really not able to achieve, to get into or get on in a career that is just too much for you.

If that's you this morning that career, that course, that first has become your master. It has become your God. It has become the bread of life to you. But it's not the bread of life. It will go mouldy and rotten and leave a terrible taste in your mouth.

And it will prevent you from seeing what it is that Jesus really offers.

If the crowd continue to be obsessed with Jesus providing Warburtons and Bird's Eye for them to eat, if they continue to want to make him their national king, leader of a bunch of freedom fighters to overthrow the Romans, then they **will not be able to see what** Jesus is really offering.

There were good reasons for chasing Jesus round the Sea of Galilee then, just as there are great reasons for chasing round after Jesus, trying to find out about him and follow him, today. But getting food wasn't one of them. And, today, getting anything that will spoil is not a good reason for following Jesus.

Jesus does not want you to follow him because he will get you more money, better health, a more together family life or new friends. Yes Jesus can provide all of those things – and throughout the history of the church he has provided them for many of his people, sometimes obviously miraculously and sometimes through others.

But desiring those things is not a good reason to follow Jesus. The thing to work for, to invest your life in, is not food that goes mouldy or stuff that breaks. It is food that lasts forever.

And we're not to think we can make that happen on our own because...

2 Jesus' bread can't be earned (v28-29)

We live, as Jerry Maguire said, in a cynical world. And we aren't the inventors of it. As soon as the crowds heard the

word "work" from Jesus lips they assume that he wants something from them.

OK. So they're not to work for food that spoils. So what do we have to do to get the eternal kind of food? What kind of stuff does Jesus want in return for looking after us?

They completely fail to see that Jesus emphasis wasn't on **work** at all. It was on the goal of work – what are you looking and living for.

Their response is the typical response of the religious person. It is self-centred and self-righteous. These people display no hesitation in thinking that, whatever it might be that God wants from them they will be able to provide it.

OK Jesus, they say, tell us the divine bargain and we'll do our bit. More prayer? No problem. Reciting some holy books? We can do that. Pilgrimage to Mecca/Lourdes/Anfield (delete as applicable)? Consider it done.

This is why religious people are such insufferably bad company. They think they can earn everything or, worse, that they have earned everything. From the Islamic suicide bomber who drinks and hires prostitutes before he straps on his bomb because he thinks he already paid for his ticket to paradise by killing a load of people. To the self-righteous church goes who despises single mothers, alcoholics and homosexuals because he doesn't drink, smoke, sleep around or need state benefits.

Religious people are awful because they want to earn God's favour. But Jesus doesn't want religious people. He doesn't want people who do works to get eternal life.

There's only one thing to do. Only one work that works. And it's this – to believe in the one God has sent.

What does God want from you this morning? It's easy to think that God has a list for you today. A sort of heavenly annual appraisal of things that the Almighty is expecting to see in order to give you a pass mark...

- More prayer
- Talking about Jesus to strangers
- Know your Bible (or at least some bits of it)
- Clean children (ie they take a bath and don't swear)
- 7 out of 10 commandments kept (depending in your level of strictness!)

And even if you're a Christian here today who knows perfectly well that none of those things will in any way get you right or keep you right with God I am prepared to bet that lots of your friends think that IS what it means to be a Christian and they must have got that impression from somewhere!

In our church, in our conversations, on our Facebook pages and blogs and everywhere else we need to be clear about this again and again and again – because Jesus was clear about it again and again and again.

What is the work of God? What does God want from you? To believe in the one he has sent.

Yes of course following Jesus has moral entailments – if you live completely differently to Jesus you can hardly be said to be following him!

But there is not one moral thing in the world you can do that will be the thing God requires of you. Nothing you can do to get the life that all of us crave – a life that not only lasts for ever but that, each moment, is free of the worry, fear, disappointment and frustration that characterise each of our lives now.

Just this – believe in the one he has sent.

3 Jesus' bread is a gift from God (v30-33)

Nostalgia starts young these days. It used to be that people were in their 40s and 50s before they started looking back to the records, TV programme and radio shows of their youth.

Now, perhaps because the world changes so rapidly, even students seem to exhibit a strange yearning for a simpler age – sometime around 2002.

That kind of thinking that everything used to be better long ago has been present throughout human history. Since the ancient Greeks 2,500 years ago people have been complaining that today's youth aren't as well behaved as the previous generation.

And in Jesus' day the crowd he had just fed with miracle bread were looking back fondly on the days of Moses, 1,500 years earlier.

OK Jesus, they say. You want us to believe in you. You're setting yourself up as a big shot from God. In fact, it seems Jesus, that you're even suggesting you are greater than that greatest of the Jews, Moses.

So prove it. V30: *"What miraculous sign will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefather ate manna in the desert; as it is written 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'"*

As they journeyed through the desert wilderness Moses provided the people, more than 1 million of them, miracle bread from heaven to eat every day for 40 years. Twice as much on Fridays and a day off on Saturday.

We might think that the sign Jesus has just given them – feeding 5,000+ people with amazingly multiplied bread and fish from a little boy's lunchbox should be enough.

But, when you think about it, the crowd have a point. After all that miracle is, obviously, less impressive than the one that happened when Moses was in charge:

- Then a million people – this time only a few thousand.
- Then bread from nothing – this time bread from bread.
- And, most important, then bread 12,000 days in a row – this time just the once.

You can see what they are saying can't you. If you're really greater than Moses what better miracle will you do that proves you are greater than Moses not just some pale imitation of the great man?

If I came to you and said I was greater than Steve Jobs you'd want to know that I had a company bigger and more impressive than Apple to prove it wouldn't you?

If I said I was greater than J K Rowling you'd want to see a better book than Harry Potter to affirm that.

So when Jesus says he is greater than Moses you can understand why they might ask for some sign to prove it.

The trouble is that they have forgotten where the miracle bread came from. Well actually they haven't forgotten. The crowd know perfectly well where the miracle bread, the manna, was from. They've just said it: "he came them bread from heaven to eat."

Who gives things from heaven? Not Moses but GOD.

And just as God, not Moses, gave the manna so God gives the true bread from heaven. The bread of which manna was just a little illustration or picture.

That bread gave sustenance to a group of refugees in a desert for 40 years. And, as we'll see in next week's passage, despite the fact that they fed on miracle bread they all died in the desert of disease or old age.

That bread gave temporary sustenance to some. This bread, the true bread, gives life to the world. It is for everyone and anyone.

You can't get this bread from any human being. Jesus is telling the crowd off here because they are making too much of Moses and not enough of God. And that's a human tendency throughout the ages isn't it?

We look for gurus, preachers, leaders, friends and partners to give us satisfaction, meaning and life. They might be living girlfriends or dead philosophers. They might be Bible teachers or best mates. But none of them can give life to us. Only true bread, a gift from God, can bring real life.

And what is this bread? Well, as v33 makes clear...

4 Jesus IS food for eternal life (v34-40)

The crowd are still, it seems, thinking of something that requires to be given again and again and again. *"From now on give us this bread"*, they say.

But that is not the kind of food Jesus is. What Jesus offers is something once for all. V35: *"He who comes to me will NEVER be hungry, and he who believes in my will never be thirsty."*

Jesus will not only satisfy his people's life-hunger but also their thirst – he is more than just bread. He is completely satisfying.

But what does that mean? After all I'm sure we all know that there are Christians around the world who physically starve – how has Jesus satisfied them with bread? And, if we spiritualise the verses, there are plenty of Christian people, even many of us here this morning I'm sure, whose experience of life is not that knowing Jesus completely satisfies.

The room is filled with people who are frustrated in their jobs, anxious about their finances, stressed about their families, worried about illness or experiencing messed up relationships with others.

So how can Jesus say that anyone who has come to him will never be hungry or thirsty again?

Well the answer comes in v40. What is God's intention for Jesus the bread of life? What hunger is he meant to satisfy? *"My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day."*

The hunger that Jesus satisfies is the longing for eternal life. The desire that lies in every human heart to escape death. The thirst not to have all our dreams and deeds rendered utterly worthless by the thought that one day will we be reduced to ashes and utterly extinguished into darkness.

That is the bread of life. Eternal life. An eternal life that begins now for all who trust in Jesus and that is perfected at the last day when Jesus returns.

If you are a Christian here this morning of course there are endless frustrations and sadnesses living in a messed up world. But the bread that satisfies, Jesus Christ, makes things different even here and now. Why? Because you know that this life is not all ultimately rendered meaningless by death.

And what is required of you to gain this life? Well it's very simple. We've already seen that it is simply to "believe" in Jesus. Here in v40 Jesus explains it in even simpler terms. All you have to do is "look to the Son."

Do you want satisfaction for ever? "Look to the Son."

Now obviously that doesn't mean a quick glance. A decision in a church meeting that you're going to follow Jesus and then never look at him again. Looking to the Son and believing in him are ongoing commitments.

But I do think that sometimes Christians, for good reasons, can make becoming a Christian too complicated. Because we want people to understand that following Jesus changes your whole life, because we want people to understand that Christ and Christians are hated by the world. Because we want people to have a solid grounding in what it is that Christians believe...

Because of those things we set the Christian faith up as a whole big series of beliefs you have to jump through. But it's not really. It's simply looking to the Son. Look to Jesus. Recognise that you have no other hope in the universe for real life and look to Jesus.

Then come and listen to what he has to say about everything else. Then come and hear the thoughts of Christ on creation and the Bible and his return and morals and church and everything else.

But first – look to Jesus. If you do that God's will, the central aim and vision of the creator of the whole universe, is that everyone who does that. Everyone who looks to Jesus will have eternal life.

And his will shall not be thwarted. Everyone in whom God works, v37, to move them the look to Jesus will come. And Jesus Christ will never turn anyone away.

We all love a bargain. This morning I want you to know that the deal Jesus offers is both unexpected and better than we imagine.

It is unexpected because it is not like all the other offers out there. It is not like Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or Communism or the international corporations who sell us stuff.

None of those things really give us anything. They may have a philosophy. They may have a set of things for us to do. They may have stuff for us to buy.

But Jesus offers us himself. Jesus is the bread of life and he gives himself for us to have life. As we'll see next week he does that when he offers himself on a Roman cross in our place, dying where we ought to die so that we can live in the perfect world only Jesus is entitled to.

The bargain Jesus offers is unexpected.

And it is better than we imagine. Better because not only is it the best and most ultimate thing any human being can wish for – eternal perfection in an eternally perfect world.

But better because all it costs is a look. A look to the Son. No works can earn it. No past failure can disqualify you from it. If you want life all you have to do is put your trust in the bread. Put your hope in Jesus. Say you are sorry he has not been your hope in the past and come to him, safe in the knowledge that he will never drive you away.

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October 2007