

THE BREAD OF HEAVEN

Readings: Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6: 24-35

When I put together the Reflections each week, one of the resources I often consult is, 'Weekly Worship' from the Church of Scotland website.

This week, the Bible commentators on that site point out that, this week's lectionary texts contain a common thematic thread of 'God's provision and our response to it'.

God's provision and our response to it.

The lectionary readings begin in the Exodus story with God providing quails and mana to sustain the complaining Israelites in the desert.

The second reading from Ephesians is about God's provision of spiritual gifts to build up the church – the Body of Christ.

In the gospel reading Jesus is God's provision, and Jesus is described as, the 'bread of life'.

'God's provision and our response', is a theme that should run through all of our lives, for the whole of our lives.

Whether we recognize it or not, most of us are born into a world that is full of grace.

From the moment we are born, we become the receivers of a totally un-earned goodness. A goodness which, at first, comes through the goodness of our parents, especially our mothers. A goodness that continues throughout our lifetimes.

We grow up in a world that we have had no part in creating. Everything we need, (materially, psychologically and spiritually), is in that world that we did not create, everything - from the oxygen we breathe, to the food and the warmth we need, is all 'given' to us.

We grow and thrive (most of us) in an ecosystem which actually conspires to give us life and conspires to keep us alive. All the plants and animals in our ecosystem, make life possible for us.

We are an apex recipient of the Earth's resources within our ecosystem.

So, when we wake up in the morning (which all of us did this morning) our response to all this grace, our response to all this 'the goodness of life', should be one of gratitude.

When Jesus said, 'I am the bread of Life', he was describing that goodness of life, that grace, that is the substance of all of life.

³³*For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*

In the very first Chapter of John, Jesus is described as the Logos, or the life-force. He is also described as the 'light that is in everyone who comes into the world'.

The Light, or image of God is in you, and it is in me.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus used the metaphor of bread to describe himself.

The crowd in our gospel story, had witnessed the miracle of the Loaves and fishes, and they pursued Jesus, hoping to see him do more miracles.

They didn't recognize the bread of life, or the goodness of life, that was epitomized in Jesus' life and ministry.

Earlier on in the story, they wanted to seize Jesus and make him a king, the ultimate symbol of power, riches, and prestige.

But as we know, that is not what Jesus had in mind when he spoke about the Kingdom, or the reign of God.

God's provision, and our response.

I've been reading a book lately called, 'Utopia For Realists' by a young Dutch writer and philosopher called, Rutger Bregman.

Utopia For Realists is a book I have shared with our Faith & Reason Group last Sunday.

I am very excited about the book; I think its brilliant.

I took to the book very easily, because I'm a natural optimist. Always have been. I will often hang up the washing, even if the weather doesn't look too promising, because I believe that sooner or later, the weather will become fine again. A natural (perhaps foolish) optimist.

Rutger Bregman is an optimist. And he is someone who chooses to focus on the positive side of our human nature.

In another of his books entitled 'Humankind' he argues that human nature is basically good.

In Rutger Bregman's book, 'Utopia for Realists', he reminds us that we are living in a golden age, compared to people who lived before us.

That the last 200 years has been a period of massive changes, most of those changes have been for the better /for the good.

200 hundred years ago in Europe, only a small percentage of people enjoyed 'the good life'. Most of that small percentage were from the nobility or from wealthy families. The great majority lived wretched lives, mired in poverty. The average lifespan 200 years ago was about 40.

Bregman writes about how, in the last two hundred years, billions of us are suddenly rich compared to people living in Europe in the 16 & 1700s. Billions of us are now well-nourished, clean, safe, smart, healthy, and occasionally even beautiful, because of the scientific advances of the last two hundred years.

In 1820, 84% of the world's population still lived in extreme poverty, but by 1981, that percentage had dropped to 44%. And now, a few decades later, it is under 10%. In the First World countries, we are over-fed, over-indulged, over medicated, enabling us to live longer, more comfortable lives.

Bregman goes on to say, "we are living in an age of biblical prophecies come true. What would have seemed miraculous in the Middle Ages is now commonplace: the blind restored to sight, crippled who can walk, (with the aid of electronic prosthesis), and the dead returned to life.

In the example of 'the dead returned to life', Bregman is referring to DNA that was used to bring back to life an extinct Australian frog – in what is called the 'Lazarus Project'. And this is just a beginning.

He doesn't specifically mention this, but 70 years ago, very few people had hot showers in their homes, or insulation.

We are in a sense, 'living in Utopia'. Something which should elicit our gratitude.

If there is a hell, it is something we create for ourselves. Or we create hell for others through our lack of the virtues that could make us better people.

We give up our virtues in favour of our vices, so to speak. We go to war with our neighbour because we want our neighbour's property. E.g. Ukraine. Israel and Palestine. Wars anywhere begin with 'wanting what we don't have'.

But for the majority of people, we are living as it were, in Utopia.

That is not to say there are no problems in the world. Of course, there are problems.

The person who is unemployed; the person who has been told they have an incurable disease, the person who has a mental illness, may not see the goodness of life so easily.

That is where we, and others come in. That is where experts and clinicians come in. That is where healing communities come in. Hopefully, the Church is one of those healing communities.

We are always striving for a better Utopia, one where diseases are overcome, and where new cures are found. We are moving in that direction. But we are not there yet.

This week I met with a number of clergy and caregivers at the Cransford Hospice. We listened to a doctor and some of the staff talking about the development of hospice movement over the last few decades. The development of palliative care and the partial

goal, of helping people to 'die well'. The demystification of death and accepting death as part of life.

These are all signs of progress towards the Utopia we dream about, or we pray about, when we say, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Today, let us recognize the bread of heaven that we eat every day, as we take in, and enjoy the goodness of life, epitomized in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

PRAYER

Loving God,
We give you thanks
For your gracious provision
For giving us the bread of heaven.
Make us ever-conscious of your goodness
In everything and in everyone
Who is part of our lives.
Through Jesus Christ
Who called himself,
The Bread of Heaven. Amen.