

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

If anyone was present at Matins on the 4th Sunday of Eastertide, they may be having a faint sense of déjà-vu as they hear today's readings, and this might persist into the first few paragraphs of this sermon (though not the whole of it, I assure you!).

One of my favourite restaurant chains before the pandemic was Le Pain Quotidien, which I frequented both in Chelsea and on my arrival here in Kensington.

I am never quite sure whether this chain was deliberately set up to have overtones of Christian teaching in its name and its philosophy, but it nevertheless offers us very familiar imagery. Of course, the name, meaning "Daily Bread", links it with a phrase used by Christians in almost every act of worship the world over: "Give us this day our daily bread."

Elsewhere on their website, we find the strapline, "Share love, share kindness, share bread!"

I remember being very touched one day to find a decorated blackboard in the restaurant, illustrated with drawings of bread and wine, which invited visitors to "Join us at the Table". It explained underneath: "We believe that community is what nurtures, inspires and feeds the soul. This is why we have a communal table in each of our restaurants."

It is hard for a Christian reading this not to be struck by the similar circumstances in which we join one another around God's Table to receive Holy Communion, for our souls to be inspired and fed.

When I pointed this out to the girl serving at our table, she was moved to tears.

"Le Pain Quotidien" could also be the title of today's Old Testament reading, as we heard the Lord promising Moses that he would rain bread from heaven every morning, and the Israelites could gather as much as they needed for their daily needs.

Manna from heaven is a familiar concept, even among those who are not ardent readers of the Bible. The word Manna itself simply means in Hebrew, "What is it...?" as the puzzled Israelites woke to find the ground covered with mysterious fine flakes.

The Israelites are forbidden from gathering more than they need for the day ahead, as it will turn rotten overnight. Indeed, God says that he is testing them, to see if they obey his instructions, and presumably, whether they trust in his promise to continue to provide for them as the days go by.

It is a powerful reminder that we are all naturally acquisitive; the scenes of people stockpiling lavatory paper at the start of the first lockdown remind us how little we trust God to provide, and how much we put ourselves first before others in direct contravention of the Bible's teaching. Who can forget the images of the weeping, exhausted intensive care nurse unable to buy food because others had taken more than their daily bread?

How do we stand by and watch other countries desperate for the vaccines which will bring life, health, safety and freedom, as we hear of unused vaccines here being thrown away because not enough people are coming forward?

Even the question of receiving refugees and asylum seekers, perhaps those fleeing danger and even death in their own countries, may offer us the chance to share the freedom and wonderful gifts God has given us in this country with those who have been less fortunate.

Some might say that we find ourselves hesitant to share because of the suspicion that others will take everything for themselves, but if we as Christians cannot break a cycle of self-orientation, then who will model this kind of restraint, generosity and love of neighbour which Jesus tells us comes second only to love of God?

Do we really need to be reminded of Christ's call to care for all by the strapline of a café chain, "Share love, share kindness, share bread...?"

Scientists and economists tell us that God provides enough each day to feed every mouth on earth, and yet we see the world's resources stockpiled in the rich nations and scarce indeed in the poorer areas of the globe.

Our Gospel reading follows on directly from the famous story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, in which a boy gave up his picnic lunch of five loaves and two small fishes and Jesus was able to share it with more than five thousand people.

It has sometimes been suggested that the boy's act of generosity in fact prompted others to reveal that they, too, had concealed picnics they were hesitating to share for fear of losing out, but when pooled, these could feed everyone.

No-one would deny that it is hard to share what seem to be our hard-won goods with others.

Yet, if we can uncurl our tightly clenched fists to share what we have, to speak out against the stockpiling of vaccines or food, or the restriction of aid for those in need, we shall be responding to God's test for the Israelites, by showing that we have the true faith which believes that God will provide our daily bread.

Here at St Mary Abbots, our Foodbank collections have now re-opened, and if you feel able to share something from your weekly shop with others locally who struggle to feed themselves or their children, do drop non-perishable goods at the church to be delivered on Thursdays to the Foodbank.

The Archbishop of Canterbury encourages Anglicans to support the Unicef Vaccinaid campaign as we give donations in thanks for our own vaccinations to support others across the world, and details can be found for this on the Church of England website.

Jesus assures us that "the bread of God is that which comes down from Heaven and gives life to the world."

In Christ, God has shared his gift of life and redemption with us. We too are called to share what we have been given with others. **Amen**