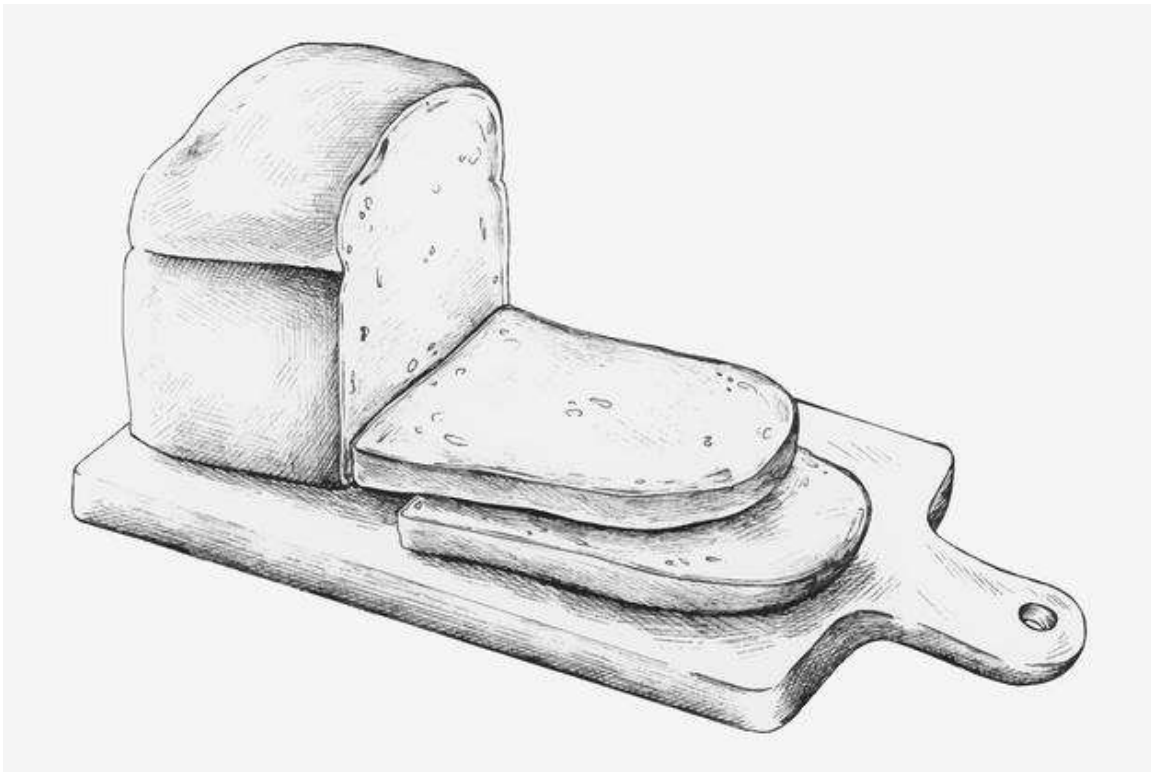


Sermon for Christ Church Cathedral on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021

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



Today, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, in some cathedrals and churches across the land, there will be a celebration of bread, where loaves of bread baked from the first-ripened grain are brought to the churches to be consecrated. It's called Lammas Day. The word "lammas" comes from the Old English *hlaf*, "loaf," and, *maesse* "mass" or "feast." Through the centuries, the pronunciation of "loaf-mass" was altered to "lammas". So as Loaves are brought forward and a priest might give a typical blessing on this day: "Dear Lord, upon the rich earth send a blessing. Bless the grain of the new harvest used by the miller and the baker to create bread and life for those who will be fed by it. May we never take these good gifts for granted. Amen."

And during lock down many of us did not take bread for granted. As we faced the possibility of food shortages, many turned to making their own bread. In fact, baking became a widespread phenomenon. The number of hits on “Simple recipes BBC - bread making” skyrocketed and some had previous expertise, while others, like me, had none. Great positivity was derived from kneading and pummelling out all our frustration and fear of the pandemic into the dough. It was also very therapeutic to see the yeast helping the bread to rise, transforming a small piece of dough to a larger loaf of bread. I shall not forget the warm, rich and delicious smell from the oven that pervaded not only the kitchen but the whole house. A comfort in dark times. In the exuberance of my achievement, I gave my bread not only to my family, who smiled while consuming it and put copious amounts of butter and jam on it, but also to a good neighbour. Yesterday I texted her to get a honest feedback for this sermon. She said “Generous, kind - but not always edible!”

Mercifully the bread delivered by the Lord to the Israelites as they wandered for over 40 years in the desert was not only edible but literally a life saver. I have always had this image of manna falling from the sky but in today’s reading it says “the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground”. (Exodus 16:14). The Israelites did not recognise its substance but as Moses said to them “it is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat”. (Exodus 16:16). (Its lightness and fineness were the opposites of mine!). In John’s Gospel Jesus reminds the crowd and his apostles that this appearance of bread was not some magic trick conjured up by Moses, but rather a sustenance given by His father from heaven. “Moses did not give you bread from heaven, but my Father gives you true bread from heaven.” (John 6:32). Interestingly in the previous chapter, John has just recorded that Jesus provided, in just the same way, true bread from heaven while feeding 5,000 followers from five small barley loaves and two small fish. But Jesus here emphasises that bread is not

just sustenance for the nourishment for our bodies but spiritual bread that feeds our spiritual lives. It gives life to the full and it is through Him that this fulfilment is achieved. He states clearly that “I am the bread of life.”

That is why during the Last Supper Jesus took the unleavened bread and broke it to symbolise not only his broken body and his death on the cross but also the sharing of one body amongst many. As we celebrate the Eucharist later, taking and sharing bread together offers us not only a way to walk with Christ but also a way of sharing our faith and commitment to him. He is the bread we must all take if we truly want to find physical, spiritual and eternal life. However, it is in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that light is shone on the import of the sharing of the bread together. As one theologian wrote, “Community is the idea of the body of Christ, which is both many and one. And all these limbs of the body share out the work of God, ensuring that no single individual is not valued.” Paul therefore gives us in his letter a description of the ideal shape of a Christian community. There is no point in taking bread and sharing the Eucharist if we do not translate that into an expression of God’s wisdom and purpose, recognising that we are all called to know love and find faith to walk the way of Christ. We are called to translate those ‘gifts’ into actions. James letter emphasises that the way of following Christ is a way which is accompanied by good deeds. “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?” (James 2:14). James points to the connection between the physical and spiritual. “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food if one of you says to him “Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good it that? In the same way faith by itself if not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:17). We cannot afford to be dead in this way. There have been too many deaths and too much suffering in this country in the last 18 months for that. Coming to worship week in week out must be accompanied by action. We must see the Eucharist, as we share in the body

of Christ, as a symbol not only of unity but of being formed in the “likeness of Christ” to go and do His will in the world.

The question arises each day then, how can we get more engaged in actually doing God’s work? You, like me, may be terrified and frustrated by disasters and suffering in other parts of the world: floods in Germany, famine in Madagascar, strife in Afghanistan and the impending climate crisis.

But what about ways to really do good, in an active, hands-on sense? If we look around our city and our county, there is a vast amount of work that needs doing. Some of you may know the Oxfordshire Community Foundation (OCF), an umbrella organisation supporting food banks, community projects and charities throughout the county. I was staggered to learn about several indices of deprivation OCF uses in its recent report “Oxfordshire Uncovered” to assess needs across the county: 15 neighbourhoods in Oxfordshire that are ranked in the 20 most deprived nationally, 1 in 5 children living in poverty and 30,000 people over 65 living alone. This last index implies a high degree of loneliness and isolation, and during the pandemic we became far more aware of the adverse consequences that ensue from these.

OCF connects and creates networks of people and relationships needed to address the problems highlighted in its research. OCF supports people working and volunteering for organisations helping vulnerable people day in, day out. These people have the expertise, compassion and imagination to come up with impactful community-based solutions. They try to ensure that every individual is valued.

Areas OCT covers include: food distribution to low-income families, emergency grants to homeless people, people living in poverty, those with mental health issues, those with disabilities, those from minority ethnic groups and families dealing with Covid-19. OCF is literally a life saver. Supporting organizations such as “Dance to Health” which addresses loneliness and the need for physiotherapy among the elderly, “My Life, My Choice” is a self-advocacy non-profit run by and for people with learning disabilities and another non-profit, “Farm Ability” is a day service for adults with autism.

Later, after the service, you will have a chance to meet the CEO and Chair and ask how to support this work. And the wonder of OCF is that whatever your particular interest, be it education, disability or the provision of basic supplies to the homeless, OCF will have a connection to a relevant front-line charity which you can support.

So, as we thank the Lord for our daily bread, both physical and spiritual, may we be reminded to use our gifts. Remember Christ is the bread of life who gave gifts to his people. Therefore, be determined to spread the love of God wherever you are, as God’s love tears down walls. I hope you become free to share the gifts of God, so that you love all the individuals in our community here and in the county, so they see the glory of God and experience His all-embracing love and creative power. For it is the living Christ alone that is the source that can satisfy our souls, He is the bread of life and from Him flow streams of living water, love, forbearance, forgiveness and all goodness. Amen.