

Midweek Reflection

“I am the Bread of Life” – Kate Day

Today we start a new series of Midweek Reflections, this time looking at Jesus’ “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel. Just like the “signs” which we thought about before Lent, there are seven of them (there are lots of sevens in the Bible, starting with the seven days of Creation); and some people think they are a bit like parables – using an ordinary idea to give a bigger picture of who Jesus is.

In a moment we’ll be turning to chapter 6 of John’s gospel, where Jesus feeds the five thousand with five bread rolls and a couple of fish. When the people come to find him the next day, he takes things in a different direction.

But let’s start not 2000 years ago, but some 1,500 years before that. Around 1500BC. With a man herding his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert of Horeb. He hasn’t always been a shepherd, eating coarse bread, dried and stale after days spent out in the wilderness with the flocks. Once he ate the finest bread in Pharaoh’s palace. There – you’ve guessed. His name is Moses and he is about to notice not just a bush which is on fire – a common enough occurrence - but that Almighty God is speaking to him, sending him back to bring God’s people out of Egypt. Moses isn’t very keen. “But who shall I tell them has sent me?” he asks, rather querulously. “I AM who I AM” says God.

I am. The closest we get to God’s own name.

“I am,” says Jesus to the crowds in John’s gospel, inviting the comparison. “I am.... the bread of life.”

Bread. Flour. Water. Some milk powder, sugar, a little salt. And, of course yeast. We’re lucky and own a breadmaker which makes it easier to bake our own. But once a year, on the evening of Maundy Thursday we make it the traditional way – or rather we make hot cross buns, which are pretty close. All those ingredients – and currants too – gathered from so many places. Mixed. Kneaded. Proved. Baked. Ready to be broken on Good Friday. Special bread for a special season.

When Moses led the people of God out of Egypt they too had a special bread. Baked without yeast, because they were in a hurry to go. Every year, at Passover, they baked it, and used it in their special meal to remember that God

had set them free. One year, Jesus took it and broke it. "Every time you do this," he said, "remember me."

"I am.... the bread of life."

When Moses and the people of God were in the wilderness, learning how to be God's people, learning to rely on him, to trust him, God provided miraculous bread – new every morning. Just enough for each day. "Manna" they called it. Which is Hebrew for "what is it?" They had never come across anything like this before. It tasted like wafers made with honey. The taste of belonging to God. So different from the hunger of belonging to Pharaoh. The taste of Life, rather than the hunger of slavery.

"I am.... the bread of life."

Today, if you visit any bakery or large supermarket you'll find a huge range of bread on display. With yeast. Without yeast. Wholemeal, white, granary. Crusty, soft. Sourdough and bagels, flatbread and pain au chocolat. So many ways to eat bread. How many do we try? Or do we just stick with what we know?

And still. "I am.... the bread of life," says Jesus. Maybe he can be found in more places than we expect.

And then there's our everyday bread. The bread that's part of the stuff of everyday life.

Occasionally it's dressed up, like hot cross buns or bread and butter pudding, but mostly it's sandwiches or toast. Maybe rarely noticed beneath the cheese and pickle, marmite or jam.

I know someone who once gave up bread for Lent. Once. They said it was the hardest thing they had ever given up. I talked to someone who can no longer eat 'ordinary' bread. They felt something was missing.

It made me think. How many of the most life-giving, most nourishing things in life do people overlook, just because their focus is elsewhere? Not just "people". Us, even.

"I am the bread of life," says Jesus in John chapter 6. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

And that makes me think too. Who do we know who is hungry for the Hope, the Life, the Love that Jesus offers? We'd be happy to share a loaf of bread. Can we share our story of the bread of life?

"I am the bread of life," says Jesus. In trusting God. In remembering Jesus. In seeing his Spirit at work in the world. In sharing our story and his story.

"The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives light to the world," said Jesus.

They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."