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Introduction

Jesus is teaching at Capernaum. We don't know how long he stayed there or whether these words in John's gospel are likely to be an amalgam of several sermons delivered on several days. These are the 'key points' Jesus wanted to put across at this time in his ministry.

For those of us who have a preaching ministry there are some interesting thoughts in this idea that what we have written here of Jesus teaching is an abbreviation, or an executive summary, of days of talking and learning together. These are the key ideas he needed to put across over a lengthy period of teaching at the one synagogue, presumably to a relatively stable crowd.

It might be while reading this passage the key points seem to leap out at us, certainly this is a very central section of his teaching, in Capernaum an important town. With his followers around him, Jesus talks about his theology of communion, of the idea of living bread, with the life of God as seen in the minute life of the micro-bacteria.

Text

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Comment

Before the twentieth century, every raised bread was a living bread. There was no commercially produced yeast to add to flour to make bread rise, instead in every house every cook had a 'sourdough' or leaven. Jesus refers to the leaven of faith in Matthew 13, and a telling of the same story is found in Luke 13. Leaven is a natural phenomenon, a micro-bacterial development in wet flour which bubbles and these bubbles bake into the bread making it light and airy. Leaven is alive, it needs fed with fresh flour and with a little water, it needs to be kept warm, and it needs to be used, each time some leaven is taken out, a little more food and water needs to go back in. Cooks looked after their leaven, often having a place by the fire to keep it.

Jesus is teaching to an audience, steeped in knowledge of their faith, who have gathered in the Synagogue. As well as using the idea of 'living bread', which would be raised bread, he talks of bread from heaven, the manna in the desert. Earlier in the Jewish traditions the idea of 'unleavened' bread, that is a flat bread, came to represent God's people on the move. In Deuteronomy 16.3, the people are to eat unleavened bread 'because you came out of the land of Egypt in great haste, so that all the days of your life you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt.' Unleavened bread was good for travelling because it could be cooked anywhere there was a hot stone by an open fire. It can be rolled and stored in a bag, and it keeps well.

This tradition of using bread as a collective memory, of the unleavened bread representing the travelling people and the raised bread representing the living God, brought meals of special significance into the calendar, the 'feast of the unleavened bread' is another name for Passover. We might think of communion a little differently if we called it 'the feast of leavened bread' and tucked into huge chunks of sourdough instead of a wafer or a wee square of Mother's Pride.

Jesus uses the micro-bacterial life in the leaven as a metaphor for his own spirit. He talks of the divine as being life at a cellular level, in and through everything. He talks in metaphor and of spiritual realities using the bread-starter in every kitchen as a picture of the universal, living, bubbling faith that, tended well, will continue to make bread forever. The ancestors who ate the manna eventually died, but the people who eat the living bread will live, the focus is on the spirit living forever by partaking of the living bread, the true bread, and abiding in Jesus through that choice towards life.

Response

Making a sourdough: It isn't difficult to make a sourdough (or leaven), take 50g of wholemeal flour (strong bread flour is good if you can get it) and 50g of water. Mix them in a 1 litre bowl or jug, cover loosely, and leave on your kitchen counter. Do the same each day for four days then let the sourdough rest for two days. It should be bubbly and have a sweet-vinegar smell. To bake a loaf, take 75g of the sourdough, 150g of white bread flour and 75g of water. Mix it and leave it to rest overnight (this is called a production). This will weigh 300g. Put the production in a large mixing bowl, add 300g bread flour, a teaspoon of salt and 300g water, knead for 10 minutes, put in a bread tin and leave to rise (overnight if you can). Bake at gas mark 9 for 10 minutes, then gas 6 for 40. Enjoy your lovely living bread.

Reflection: think about the Key Points Jesus made in his sermons at Capernaum, looking back to the stories the audience before him would find familiar. How do we link our faith and life with relevant stories today, or shared common stories from

the past? How do we share bible stories so that they will be familiar to the children of the future?

Prayer

God who is life itself

Living bread, full of micro-bacterial life, bubbly, fervent, precious

Life that is spirit, in and through, between, within

Life that raises low moods, fills tired hearts and soothes our griefs

Raise within us a lightness of spirit

That we may tend as carefully

As a baker tends her leaven

The spirits of others

To make the whole batch of dough rise

As our community grows closer to you

AMEN