

SERMON – 15 AUGUST 2021 – PROVERBS 9.1-6, JOHN 6.51-58



“I am the living bread.” We continue to work our way through John chapter 6, Jesus’ teaching that John has placed after the feeding of the crowd with the loaves and the fish. It is teaching which is loaded with so much else, 2,000 years of understanding of the Eucharist. Today is also the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of our Lord, and that gives another dimension to our thoughts today.



If you visit Poltross Burn milecastle on Hadrian’s Wall, it’s just on the border of Northumberland and Cumbria, in a corner of the fort you can see the circle of the bread oven. It’s still black and burned, and you can imagine the Roman soldiers cooking their daily bread on it.

Several years ago I was at an Educational event on Hadrian’s Wall, and the speaker asked us to picture a Roman. What sort of person did we picture? A builder, a soldier, a trader, a shopkeeper. Think about their job, their clothes, their nationality, their family. Then he said “tell me what she looks like” – and, of course, every single one of us had pictured a Roman man – imagine the Roman woman in the settlements around the forts, cooking for her family. Through the ages, it is the women who have sought to feed their families.



I commented last week that one thing that has changed in our lifetime is that bread is no longer the staple of our diet that it once was. It is an extra, an add on – almost a treat, which is not how it was supposed to be.

It is not how it is for many people in our world, and in our country. There are many people in our City who do buy the cheapest bread from the Coop because that is all they can afford. That is what they need to feed the children, even if they go hungry.



“I am the living bread that came down from heaven” – and that’s a challenge to us. The Jews can’t get their heads round the person, the presence of Jesus in their midst, their need to believe, to follow, to turn their lives to him. Are we any better? I have been suffering recently from a surfeit of people who tell me how wonderful the church (for some that means St Matthew’s, for others that means St Edmund’s), how wonderful the church used to be when they used to come – how great the music was, how lively the youth work was, how lovely the Vicar was, how everyone was a community together. Now of course their church is on its last legs, and it’s all the Vicar’s fault. I did point out to one complainant that it is just as much the fault of her and her family for being too busy to come to church, and suggested she should spend as much time being involved as she spends complaining – now, of course, it is most definitely this Vicar’s fault (and for ever will be!). But before I’m too hard on her, we are all capable of looking back through our rose-tinted spectacles, I certainly do.

When we share the sacrament, whether we kneel at the communion rail or the Vicar comes to us and places the bread in our hand, we are literally doing what Christ commands us to do. We are taking his life into ourselves. When we fail to make worship a priority, we do to some extent cut ourselves off from what we are offered. Of course, Christ’s love gets to us in different ways – but we should make worship a priority. I am aware that is not always easy.



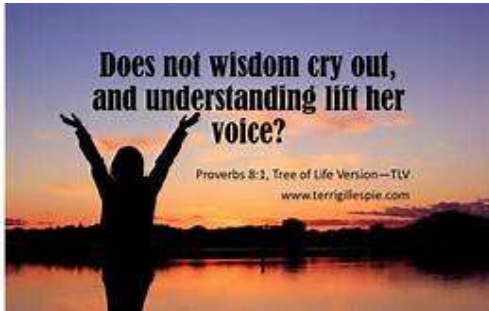
Triptych with the Annunciation, *Robert Campin*

The church celebrates today as one of the Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Ponteland was dedicated to St Mary, but you try and celebrate your Patronal Festival in the middle of August. Everyone has got somewhere else they'd rather be – “we're on holiday”, no, the choir's off – you want to celebrate “when”?

In paintings of the Annunciation, it is traditional that Mary is there, the holy young woman, she is reading, she is praying, she is quietly communing with God. I suspect that, like any young mum, once her baby actually arrived, finding time and space to read, to pray, to commune with God was not as easy. We all know, of course, that “little Lord Jesus no crying he makes”, so he must have been an easy baby to look after – believe that, you'll believe anything – but once he had brothers and sisters, I don't suppose Mary got a lot of time to herself. I hope Joseph was a helpful dad, but he was also a dad who had to work, to earn money, to provide an income – and I doubt life was always easy.



I had a young mum on the phone the other day as she wants her baby christened. The parish in which she lives has a policy that the parents must do a five week Alpha course, to learn about the basics of the Christian faith, before baptism can be arranged. I can understand this – we are asking parents to make big commitments, so they should have given it serious thought. But, as mum said, her partner works away a lot of the time, she is coping with a young family, a five week commitment isn't possible, and “I want my baby to be Christened.” Her baby will be Christened, by me, in one of our churches, and we will welcome them. It may be rare that we see them, it may feel like another flipping Christening – but I believe that my role is to offer them God's love and God's welcome, and to offer it unconditionally, and if that makes me an old reactionary priest, stuck in my ways, out of step with a mission agenda of teaching and evangelism, well, yes I am. Tough.



In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom, portrayed as female (of course) tells us to turn in here – to live, to walk in the way of insight. That’s what we seek to do, and to help others do as well. May God help us, and give us the wisdom to do so.