John 6:35, 41-51

35 Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’42They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I have come down from heaven”?’43Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves.44No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.45It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.46Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.47Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.48I am the bread of life.49Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.50This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.51I 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.’

Jesus Is Not an Option

You may recall that the first verse of this week’s Gospel lesson showed up in last week’s lesson as well. There’s a good reason for this. Scottish pastor Marcus Dods called verse 35 a concentrated gospel.[[1]](#footnote-1) This verse explains in succinct metaphor who Jesus *is* and what he *does.* Bread is a food staple in most of the world, and when we talk about food, we talk about life; Even the word bread can refer to money, which for most of the world’s population is spent on food.Here in the United States only about 15% of our money goes to purchase food, but among the poor in this country and in other countries, the proportion is much higher. And most of us know, as we face economic challenges, that when we have to cut back, the last item that we cut is food; we would even deprive ourselves of medicine before we cut back on food.

The point then that Jesus is making to us is that he is *essential.* Just as the food we eat is necessary to sustain our lives *physically,* so Christ is essential to sustain our lives *spiritually.* Some people don’t get this; the “Jews” (and we should note that when the author this gospel refers to “Jews” he means the leaders of the Jewish people; Jesus, after all, was a Jew!) that the gospel writer refers to in verse 41 didn’t get this. They saw Jesus as a human being, little Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, who grew up around them, who used to play by the sea as a child, who went to the same synagogue on Saturday. They never saw him descend from heaven. He sounds crazy. Now he’s saying that we must eat his flesh?? We shouldn’t be too hard on “the Jews,” because if CNN did a story on Jesus in those days, he would certainly be portrayed as a lunatic. How could any *man* come directly from God?

This is a mystery that everyone struggles with, it seems beyond reason, *and yet* if God truly loves us and desires our friendship and our fellowship it makes perfect sense for him to enter this world as a human being. And if he is a God who passionately wants to rescue us from a life filled with fear and devoid of meaning, would he not surrender his own life for us? This is the gospel message: God loves us to the point of dying for us, and in Christ’s resurrection we are offered a life line. Surrender the old self and take in the new. Christ says, “This is my body given for you. Take and eat and live!”

And by comparing himself with bread, Jesus is saying that we need to eat *regularly,* not once a month or once a week, but daily. When we fail to eat, we grow tired, and then we get cranky and disagreeable and no-fun-to-be-around. We get headaches. But once we have a meal, all that changes. The headache goes away. The food we digest is converted to energy, and we grow stronger, and we are able to do things that we didn’t have the strength to do before. Christ is the source of our spiritual strength. Some try to imitate Christ in their daily lives by living morally and following Jesus’ teachings, but end up only frustrated because they find that they cannot sustain this kind of life. Some then go into depression, seeing themselves as failures, unable to live up to Christ’s expectations. They have not nourished themselves on Christ and thus haven’t the energy to follow him. We cannot achieve our own salvation; we must eat the bread of life to live the life that God intends us to live. We must *ingest* Jesus, absorbing his teachings, his character, his mind.

The more we get of Christ, the more bread of life we eat, the greater our spiritual strength and energy. In basic training, I gained a pound a week for thirteen weeks, but I didn’t grow fat. The energy I expended required me to consume more food, more carbs, more bread. I simply could not have completed my basic training on a low-calorie diet. For us to do the work Christ has for us to do, and it’s easy to look around our own community to find lots of work that needs to be done, we need spiritual calories. We need more bread of life in our daily diets.

There are those who understand “belief in Jesus” to be nothing more than an intellectual decision. “Despite the fact that resurrection is an unrepeated phenomenon, I believe that Jesus was the Son of God who died for my sins.” And most of their life they struggle with this “belief” as their lives fail to have any relationship with Christ. We are reminded in today’s lesson that we need to eat regularly. You know that Muslims are required to pray five times a day to focus their minds on God. How many times a day do we pray? How much time do we spend focusing our minds on God? Perhaps if more Christians disciplined themselves to eat a healthy spiritual diet, the Church would not be in decline. So I challenge you for starters. Try praying five times a day. I don’t mean “chanting” a little poem; I mean setting your heart and mind on God. Receive the bread that Jesus offers, and grow strong in him. Amen.

1. *An Introduction to the New Testament (New York: T. Whitaker, 1888)* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)