**A Basket of Bread**

**John 6 v 22 - 59**

My starting point for this ramble through the scriptures was the Lord Jesus saying, ‘I am the Bread of Life’. I thought how often bread crops up in Scripture. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance has 360 references to bread in the Old and New Testaments and the word ‘Bread’ can mean actual bread or might stand for food. Of course, many of these references are not of any great significance, but some references to bread are notable, so I thought we’d look at a few of them today.

At first, I had the idea of a trail of breadcrumbs leading through the Bible, like the trail of breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel left to mark their path (unsuccessfully – the birds ate them!). But it really isn’t like a trail through the Bible, but an interlinked group of bread-incidents or teaching which all point to Jesus – the Bread of Life.

So, I’m calling it a bread-basket of stories, analogies and teaching, and pray that we will all receive nourishment from it and that the birds don’t come and eat what God has given us before we even get home!

**1. Abraham and Melchizedek**

The **first loaf** out of our basket comes in Genesis 14.

Several chieftains or ‘kings’ had attacked Sodom and the other cities of the plain and Abraham’s nephew, Lot, was among those who had been plundered and taken captive.

So, Abraham gathered his trained men and went off to do battle and retrieve Lot and his possessions. God gave them victory and, on his way home, Abraham had a very intriguing encounter with a man described as ‘Melchizedek, king of Salem.’

‘Melchizedek’ means ‘King of Righteousness’ and Salem is related to the word *shalom,* so ‘King of Peace’.

There’s more:

Melchizedek was a priest of God most High. This was before the Levitical priesthood, which was instituted by God through Moses, centuries later.

Under the Mosaic law no King could perform priestly duties, but Melchizedek was both King of Righteousness and Peace **and** priest of the Most High God.

There’s more: Melchizedek brought out a meal of bread and wine for Abraham and pronounced a blessing over him.

There’s more: then Abraham gave a tenth, a tithe, of his spoils to Melchizedek.

The writer of Hebrews (5 v 7) picks up that this mysterious king/priest is an archetype of Christ Himself: Jesus was **not** of the priestly tribe of Levi, but nevertheless is High Priest forever ‘after the order of Melchizedek’, as well as being our King of Righteousness and Peace, who feeds us with bread and wine representing His own body and blood given for us; who pronounces blessing over us and receives honour and worship from us.

**2. Passover: Exodus 12**

The next piece of **bread** from the basket is unleavened.

We have moved on from Genesis to Exodus where the Hebrew descendants of Abraham have been living in Egypt for four centuries and are enslaved and oppressed. God is in the process of releasing them and bringing them to the new land He promised them so long ago.

The plagues on the Egyptians are coming to a climax and there is still no willingness to let God’s people go, so the last and most terrible of the judgements is about to happen.

The main emphasis is of course on the unblemished lamb that must be slaughtered, and the blood put on the door posts and lintels as a sign of that substitutionary death for the Hebrews inside. Rightly, we see in this a fore-shadowing of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who was slaughtered at Passover time and His blood poured out on our behalf.

But where does bread come into it? And why did it have to be unleavened ie without a raising agent?

It was partly to do with having to make bread quickly – they had to be ready to leave with haste and they didn’t have time to wait for bread to rise. (Ex. 12 v39). But I believe there is another significance!

The light dawned when I read that leaven was not yeast but a fermented starter dough from the previous batch.

Paul uses the analogy in 1 Cor.5 v 6-8 *…Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump (of bread dough), as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.’*

Do you see? The leaven was left from the previous batch of bread dough.

Paul is saying that, before we came to Christ, there were wrong things in our lives – which permeated our being like leaven permeates bread dough. As Steve said last week, these things have no place in our new lives in Christ and must be got rid of.

Jesus used the ‘leaven’ analogy in a slightly different way when He warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In this case, He was using the metaphor to refer to the old leaven of self-effort, trying to be righteous by keeping the Law and adding more and more rules, leading to failure and hypocrisy. Jesus is the Bread which gives life, not condemnation and death.

Nine days ago, David Parsons, the Anglican Diocesan Bishop of the Arctic, posted a courageous message from the GAFCON IV meeting, standing up for the truth. It includes his testimony which, I think shows very clearly the consequences of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

“I know Jesus and how He saved me and sent me to bring a message of hope to those who know the consequences of living self-centred lives.

Those of us who know the bad news of life wish to share the good news that Jesus loves us even while we are deep in sin. I do not offer philosophies or rules, but Jesus. Jesus came to me **while I tried to live the Christian life following the old covenant,** yet the more I tried the deeper sin entangled me. My heart’s desire was to repent of my own sinful desires to be self-governing. If I could have repented and cleaned myself I would have … but couldn’t and I can’t.

Yet, while deep in sin and dead in spirit, while I was still following a spirit of disobedience, Jesus came in with love and asked me to come follow Him, learn His ways, His truth and His life.”

**3. Manna Exodus 16 v 13 f**

When the Hebrews had escaped Egypt and miraculously crossed the Red Sea and were safe, they began to grumble that they had had plenty of meat and bread in Egypt, but now they were afraid that they would starve in the wilderness. God promised them bread and this brings us to the next item in my bread basket.

(Manna wasn’t available in M & S, so I’ve substituted these prawn crackers!)

The people woke up in the morning and the ground was covered with dew. When that lifted there were white flakes everywhere. They said, ‘What is it?’ and that’s what they called it – ‘manna’ – What is it?’ Moses told them to gather just enough for each family for one day. When the sun rose, it melted away. They were not to try to save any for the next day, if they did it just went maggoty and stank. The exception was on the eve of the Sabbath, when they collected two days’ worth and it could be baked or boiled and kept for the next day.

Jesus taught us to pray: ‘Give us **this** day our **daily** bread’. We are reminded of our dependence on God for our physical needs, but also we need daily bread spiritually. Day by day, meeting with the Lord and feeding on His word. Someone said, ‘Seven prayerless days makes one weak’! I would add in ‘Seven days without feeding on the Word of God, also makes one weak.’

**\*4. The bread of Life**

In our reading from John 6, it was the day after the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand (plus).

The whole experience of being in a remote place and having bread miraculously provided for them had obviously reminded the crowd of the manna. They said, ‘This is truly the Prophet {i.e. another prophet like Moses} who is to come into the world.’ They wanted to establish Jesus as their political ‘bread-messiah’ - to establish an earthly paradise (John 6 v 14), one who would provide physical food and freedom from Roman oppression, but what Jesus offers is spiritual nourishment and eternal life and freedom from the oppression and bondage of sin.

So, Jesus initiated a dialogue to try to get their eyes off the physical and on to the spiritual. They were now anxious to know what works they would have to **do** in order to receive the food which gives everlasting life. *The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees*. He told them that what they need to do is to **believe** in the One God has sent them i.e. Himself.

It seems extraordinary to me that, having witnessed and benefitted from the sign of the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish, they then asked, “What sign do You do, that we may see and believe You?”

They witnessed the miracle, but they didn’t discern the sign.

It’s like people getting excited that Christmas is coming, and they’ll have a party and a turkey dinner and receive a new jumper and some scented soap, but they completely miss the amazing incarnation – that God became man. Or people anticipating hot cross buns and chocolate eggs and missing the death and resurrection of the Son of God for them.

Jesus is saying to them, ‘Look beyond Moses and manna in the wilderness. The true life-giving bread from God is right here in front of you. Believe it – believe in Me.’

And so we come to the first of the ‘I am’ statements in John’s gospel: His repetition of ‘I am’ is a subtle pointer to His deity; God revealed His Name to Moses as ‘I Am’.

v 35 Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger,’ and again in v 48 ‘I am the bread of Life.’ Not, “I **give** bread, not physical bread or even spiritual ‘bread’”, but “I **am** that bread of life.”

And for the third time He says, “I **am** the Living bread which came down from Heaven”.

And then He goes to say these extraordinary words: “If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever, and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

Naturally this was pretty controversial stuff, then, as it would be now, if we weren’t familiar with this concept.

Then, in the synagogue in Capernaum, He speaks to Jews, who were forbidden to ingest blood, because the life is in the blood, and of course, they surely must have realised that he wasn’t promoting cannibalism! But still v 53 – 58 must have been really shocking:

**53**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. **54**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. **55**For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. **56**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. **57**Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. **58**This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

Which brings me onto my last loaf:

**5. The Last supper/Holy Communion**

Of course, the bread at the Last Supper would have been unleavened because all leaven must be cleared from the house for the feast of Passover.

In the disciples’ minds would be the story of the preparations for leaving the slavery of Egypt – the lamb, living with the household for a week. Then slaughtering the innocent, unblemished lamb and painting its blood on around the doorway and making their bread without leaven to go with the roasted meat.

Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, had lived among humans for thirty plus years and, though the disciples still hadn’t grasped it, He was soon to be slaughtered and His blood would be their salvation.

When Jesus took the bread, blessed God and broke it and said ‘Take, eat; This is My body which is given for you;’ surely, they must have remembered those shocking words He had said in the synagogue at Capernaum:

‘..the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world… unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life … He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him…this is the bread which comes down from heaven ... he who eats this bread will live forever.’ (John 6 v 51 – 58)

In 1 Cor. 10v 16, 17 and 12 v 23 - , Paul teaches on the significance of the bread:

‘The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ‘

‘You can’t drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.’

We cannot have a foot in both camps – if we have accepted Jesus as our Living Bread and acknowledged Him as our Lord and God and been born again into a new life, the old leaven of our former sinful, worldly practices and beliefs, must go.

This takes time and determination that, when the Holy Spirit shows us anything that is not of Christ in our lives, we must bring it to the cross and repent.

When we come to the Lord’s table, we should examine ourselves so that, when we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are whole-heartedly His.

Paul also uses the one loaf to speak of the church. At the Lord’s table there are many people who make up the one body – the church; just as the bits of bread which we eat are parts of a whole.

1Cor. 10 v 17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread’.

If there is anything coming between us and another believer, we need to put it right if possible.

So, when we participate in Holy Communion, we are saying that we participate in the benefits of His death, and we are united with all other believers.

**Conclusion:**

I said at the beginning that this collection of scriptural breads all point to Jesus:

\*Jesus is our King of Righteousness and Peace, and our great High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, who gave bread and wine to the Patriarch Abraham, through whose greater descendant, Jesus, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

\*Jesus is not only the fulfilment of the unblemished Passover lamb. He is also seen in the bread baked without leaven – His life was without sin.

Jesus told us to pray for *daily* bread – our physical and spiritual food.

\*Jesus is the true Bread of Life, given so that, if we partake of Him by giving ourselves to Him, we will know eternal Life and will be raised at the Last Day.

\*Jesus invites us to His supper table, promising to be there with us and, as we contemplate His shed blood and tortured body and take into ourselves the symbols of that death, we again give our Yes and Amen to Him and receive Him anew.

Amen A time to reflect during ‘I am the Bread of Life’ by Suzanne Toolan, S.M.