

(Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35)

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

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.’

On ‘Yorkshire Day’ earlier this week I attended a meeting at Hudswell church. I decided to cycle there, which I must confess I found to be hard work: like much of Yorkshire, it seemed to be uphill all the way. The hardest bit was just over the Green Bridge: up Slee Gill. As I puffed my way up the hill I looked across to the Castle and noted the beautifully mown pitch of Richmond Town Football Club, down below. With the football season having just started I thought that Slee Gill might offer a good vantage point from which to gain a birds-eye view of a match. More to the point, for this budding Yorkshire-man, it would be free of charge!

This weekend, many of us have been treated to a free of charge concert, emanating from the Batts. Or rather, a whole series of concerts – with some seemingly going on at the same time! ‘Richmond Live’ is now in its twentieth year, so it is clearly doing something right...

Whether it is watching sport or listening to music, there is something about ‘being there’ – as opposed to looking on, or using the medium of television or a streaming app. Live sport or live music are, in a way, what that word implies: ‘alive’. I suppose it is the same process which is at work in any theatrical performance. As anyone who has been to our own Georgian Theatre would testify, each performance is unique because the interaction – the relationship – between the cast and the audience is dynamic and different each time. In that sense, a live theatrical performance is very much ‘alive’.

Now think of any of the Collects we use in our church services. These special prayers usually end with the ‘formula’: ‘...through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is *alive* and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever’.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died for us and rose again is ‘alive’ – and so our interaction, our relationship, with him – as ‘Christians’, as people who follow him – is dynamic on a wholly different scale from live sport, live music, or live theatre!

Those of us who were here last week will have heard me remark that a high point in John’s gospel is when Jesus says (in chapter 10, verse 10), ‘I came that they may have *life* and have it abundantly’. He is speaking about his sheep – those who follow him – and indeed, Jesus goes on to say, ‘I am the good shepherd’.

In our reading today, from chapter 6 of John’s gospel, Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of life’. I mentioned last week the significance of these and the several other ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus which are a feature of John’s gospel. Through them Jesus is making the extraordinary claim to be divine. And each time he makes that claim it is backed up by a ‘sign’ – a miracle, such as the feeding of the five thousand which we heard about last week.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus described himself as the ‘Son of Man’, when he says ‘...it is on the [Son of Man] that God the Father has set his seal.’ As Bishop Tom Wright has observed, what this means is that ‘God, like a goldsmith with a hallmark, or like a king with his great seal, has stamped this person with the mark that declares not only where he comes from but that he carries his authority’. Truly, we can say that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is for us, ‘very God and very Man’.

It is after performing the sign of feeding the five thousand that Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life’. And as we also heard, he then said: ‘Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’.

Now let’s remember that in John’s gospel there is no account of the Institution of the Eucharist – even though John considers the Last Supper at some length. In the opinion of many commentators, it is here in John’s narrative of the feeding of the five thousand that we have his version of the Institution of Holy Communion.

So later in this service, when you receive the Invitation to (come to) Communion I invite you also to reflect on who Jesus Christ is for you, and on these well-known words from the Prayer of Humble Access:

‘Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and *that we may evermore [live] in him, and he in us*’.

The Invitation to Communion today will be in a form you may have heard in our ‘Worship for All’ service, a form based on the theme of today’s gospel reading; a form which opens up the nature of our ‘common union’ with our Lord:

Come to this table – not because you are strong, but because you are weak.
Come – not through any goodness of your own, but because you need God's
mercy and help.
Come – because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more.
Come – not because you are worthy, but because Christ was born and died,
rose again, and ever lives for you.
Come and be filled with the living bread.
Come in faith, and never thirst again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.