

**Sermon for Trinity 8 (2nd August 2009)**  
**John 6:24-35, Ephesians 4:1-16**  
**Bread and Belief**

Once upon a time, in a little house in a valley not far from here, was a stubborn man. It was a very rainy day and there came a knock at the door. It was a messenger from the Environment Agency saying 'there's flood coming, you have to leave your home.' The man says 'I'm OK thank-you, God will protect me.' So the rain carries on and the house starts to flood. The man is at an upstairs window when the fire brigade come by in a boat to take the man to safety 'No, no' says the man, 'God will save me'. Another hour passes and the waters rise further. The man is now on his roof and an RAF helicopter comes overhead, but the man refuses to be lifted off 'God will save me!' he says once more. Finally the house collapses, is washed away and the man drowns. At the pearly gates the man meets God and he says 'why didn't you save me?' God says 'I sent you a messenger, a boat and a helicopter - what more could I have done for you?'

My question this morning is this. What difference does our belief in God make to us? Because what we do and say, and the decisions we make are very much a reflection of our beliefs. The man in the story clearly believed in God, but did his belief lead him to make a good decision?

Today's Gospel reading speaks about belief. Jesus has just fed the 5,000. This miracle, which contains parallels with both Moses and Elijah, shows Jesus to be the culmination of the law and the prophets: the true Messiah. The exchanges between Jesus and the crowd essentially is because the crowd don't understand what Jesus is trying say about himself. And when Jesus talks about spiritual food 'the food that endures to eternal life', they seem unable to get beyond the idea of full stomach / empty stomach (well it was 5,000 men!). It's a sobering thought, that after all that (v36), Jesus finally says "you have seen me and yet do not believe" - like in my story 'what more could I have done for you?'.

Spiritual food will sustain us to eternal life. Spiritual food comes from Jesus - 'Jesus is the bread of life'. To get that food, we must do one thing: we must believe in Jesus.

If we believe in Jesus, we will get this gift of unending spiritual food. Jesus says "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty". It's awesome. It's typically God. But what is belief?

I found a definition that described three levels of belief:

1. There's belief that comes from knowledge: the belief that if I go through the north door after the service I believe that coffee will be served.

2. Then there's belief through intellectual reasoning. This week in the news, you probably heard about the so-called atheist 'Camp Quest' in Somerset. Belief through logic and reason is what they're all about – exercises to disprove the existence of unicorns (and maybe win a £10 note signed by Richard Dawkins). Here, it seems no-one makes a decision until you've proved your point beyond doubt – which makes me think its hardly belief at all.
3. But belief in Jesus is belief that leads to personal commitment. This is no passive belief that leaves you on the roof of your house waiting for God to magically scoop you up. This is belief with a purpose, it's much more exciting because it feels very risky. And that's why so many people won't go there. But this is belief that transforms lives - your life, my life.

Belief in Jesus led the woman with the haemorrhage to take considerable risks in touching Jesus' cloak (Luke 8:44). Belief in Jesus made Zacchaeus give away half his possessions and pay back four-fold those whom he had defrauded (Luke 19:8). Belief in Jesus is what let the Holy Spirit transform a rag tag bunch of Galileans into a team of daring apostles who gave everything to spread the message of Christ throughout the known world.

So I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that belief in Jesus is 'work'. The good news is that it's God's work (v29 believing in Jesus 'is the work of God') and that by believing in Jesus, God gives us the food, the energy, to do that work.

A couple of years ago Gill and I met a very sick lady, terminally ill with cancer, but with strong belief. Physically she was so weak she could not sit up. And yet Jesus the bread of life still gave her irrepressible spiritual energy. I listened as she described her continuing prayer ministry - it was all she could do, she said. There was no passive waiting for death, but through her belief, Jesus gave her the energy to keep working right to the end of her life.

Belief also has some bearing on our Epistle today. Paul is talking about the spiritual gifts which Jesus gave to people in the church at Ephesus - gifts which Jesus also gives to the church in Burghfield. He also shows us how a church should be built up.

Pauls writes: [Jesus] 'gives some [to] be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers'. Not all the church, perhaps just a few, will have those gifts but those who do, are to use them to 'equip the saints' (that is, everyone in the church) to build up the body of Christ. What Paul is saying is that to respond to Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all people, the church's ministry is not just for the clergy or a select group of special people – it's the role of every member of the church.

Now I'm not suggesting we should all be out converting people on street corners. But you should all be able to find a way to consciously let the light of Christ shine out of whatever you do, using whatever gifts Jesus has given you, in whatever circumstances God has placed you into. It could be befriending someone you don't know very well, supporting someone who's lonely or struggling with something. You don't have to give advice, most-times all you have to do is listen. The point is, you're doing it in response to your Christian calling.

And we should be equipping each other to do that more and better.

It is more important that we do this now than any other time, certainly in my lifetime. In the last 40 years, our community's way of life, our attitudes, our family and social networks, our spirituality, have changed and continue to change dramatically. The church exists for those who are outside the church, so we have to change in response. I know for many of you this is a painful reality to accept, and you can point to things that haven't changed, but we need to recognise that people nowadays do not relate to much of what the church does - or perhaps more likely it gives them unhelpful messages. The Jesus we believe in is gentle, but he's not meek and certainly not mild.

So, to wrap up, what will sustain our church and each of us as we works to grow our Christian ministries [in building up the body of Christ] is belief in Jesus - belief that leads to personal commitment - because belief in Jesus gives us Jesus the bread of life: spiritual sustenance that will keep us going ... and going ... and going!

So what do you think of the man on the roof of his house? I hope and pray that belief in Jesus helps us to recognise God at the first knock on the door, and that we act upon what he tells us.

Kevin