

St Brandon's, Sermon for 12th August 2018

1 King 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25 - 5:27; John 6:35. 41-51

More Bread

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Jesus is being very clear here about the value of the spiritual life. Here are some of the most compelling arguments he makes for following him and some of the clearest explanations – claims – for who he is: the one sent by the Father – sent by God – the only one who has seen God. He is the human bridge to the divine, he is the flesh and blood companion, teacher and healer who can reveal the true nature and desires of God for us because he is from God, is of God, is God.

What I want to bring to mind at the outset of this sermon is the priceless gift we receive from God in Christ. The nature of the gift was the life and testimony of Jesus; the cost was his dying; the gift in perpetuity is the resurrection and ascension: his living for us and in us today; his promise of eternal life. We are able to be lifted time and time again by his love and forgiveness and compassion. To be healed in time from all manner of brokenness. To be brought back from dark places into the light, over and over again, in ways stranger and deeper than we can fathom or imagine. His promise is one of living life to the full, not just sustenance for the body, important though that is like the manna that kept the Israelites from perishing and the cakes that gave Elijah the strength to overcome his despair. The bread that is Jesus is so much more, it feeds the well-spring of life, it buys us life eternal.

This is the priceless gift, the gift beyond value. It is the gift we desire for everyone. It is why we are here today, it is what draws us here and what we receive in our worship and

Eucharist, and take back out to share with others. This is what we are about, as beloved children of God.

There is a cost to this. We recall each week the story of Jesus' sacrifice, loving in the face of betrayal, giving himself freely. As imitators of this, we try to live in love, we try to give of ourselves in the way we live. There is also a monetary cost. It falls to us to keep this place of worship open and running. To be able to share it as a beautiful, spiritually energizing place of peace and connection for us as church family to gather, and for all sorts of people with different needs to come and be fed by what it offers all through the week and in their time of greatest need. Of course it costs money to heat it, clean it, repair it, and present it as a symbol of how we value God's gifts to us, and how we can reach out with this building to speak to others of that love for them. To cause them to pause and think and feel and know, that this is a place that makes it easier to know God.

Recent reports from the treasurer indicate that our income is running a bit less than our expenditure, so we are sliding gradually backwards. Its not headline disaster, its certainly not mis-management, its about not keeping abreast of rising costs in insurance, gas, etc. There may be some here today who now feel sufficiently part of the church family to feel ready to share a bit of the running costs by a regular giving scheme. There may be some who are already stretching themselves and mustn't risk over-stretching but might be very comfortable with the idea of making provision in their will to leave a legacy. It may be that talking to the treasurer or a churchwarden about how you might appropriately help contribute to funds will enable you to make that step and help keep this flourishing.

And we are amazingly flourishing and well provided for! It might not look like it if the starting point is to say “*Where is our Priest-in-Charge? Why should we give more? how can we be spending more, when we have no Priest in the Rectory?*”

Well, we don’t pay directly for our Rector, so we don’t make any saving when we don’t have one. All parishes pay into a central fund and all salaries are from that central fund.

We are a body of churches that form a deanery, and a collection of deaneries that form a diocese, and the number of paid parish priests that can be afforded is calculated for the whole area, and shared out as best they can. We in the Durham deanery are going to be able to afford only nine instead of the present eleven parish priests for the 24 churches in Durham deanery.

This won’t immediately affect our chances of getting a parish priest as the Diocese have offered us a priest-in-charge funded by the rent of the Rectory (even though we don’t own the Rectory): they get to live there free in exchange for being priest-in-charge plus some other duties. So that puts us outside the general system, in ways we traditionally have been. However, we will be rightly called to work rather closer with other local churches than we have been accustomed to doing, in ways not yet conceived. More will be being shared about the Deanery restructuring during the autumn and next year, and our ideas can help shape it.

But it’s not this relatively privileged and protected status of St Brandon’s that I rejoice in, and that prompts me to say we are blessed, richly endowed and flourishing. It is because of the witness of all of us to the transforming power of God.

Instead of saying “*Where is our Priest-in-Charge? We are helpless, deficient, deprived and impoverished*”, we have said “*Here we are, we can do this, we can be this for each other.*” It would be easy for others to say of those who have come forward, the equivalent to, “*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’?*”

But that hasn’t happened, people have been able to lead intercessions, preach, bring music, come forward for new tasks without other people doubting that that they are offering because they are drawn to do so, drawn towards Jesus, towards God. In being drawn and doing those tasks, they are transformed, and we are blessed and transformed by that witness and giving of themselves.

We are people transformed by God’s grace to do his mission here. The quality of the intercessions, serving, reading, sacristoning, preaching, flowers, music, teaching and provision for children is all astonishing.

The care and commitment to good governance is superb. Yet more amazing, is the quality of fellowship and Christian support here. This has pastoral side has grown and deepened over recent years, supported and modelled by Deborah’s pastoral ministry. We are hugely blessed and richly endowed. However, Deborah had three years of training to become an Authorised Pastoral Assistant, and further training to encompass special areas of bereavement and suicide support, and funeral ministry. I had seven years of training for priesthood, further training in spiritual direction and am about to go for a three week course for spiritual direction and leading retreats. The majority of this training has been paid for by the Diocese, and we benefit here from the fruit of that training.

Half a dozen others in this congregation have had as much or more formal or informal training paid for by the Diocese or central church funding, and we are the almost exclusive beneficiaries.

Keen bidding and strategising enabled us to secure tens of thousands of pounds of public money for building repairs. These are the financial gains we have had, that is part of the provision and blessing we enjoy. That is why we should be seeing ourselves as part of the wider body of church, both in our activities and in our willingness to contribute financially to the overall flourishing of the deanery and diocese.

Some of the support and training we currently benefit from is in child safety and safe-guarding awareness, that has enabled us to build a properly protected, compliant and robust Sunday School team. Of course it is the talents and spiritual depth of the leaders that make it such effective, enjoyable and meaningful learning but the legal structures have to be there for that to be delivered. We wince at this legislation but we are also helped to achieve it by the provision of the Diocesan resourcing.

All this enables us to flourish as a church and be transformed for God's work; to draw others because we are drawn.

We are richly blessed and really need to keep the financial aspects healthy to complement that.

Money is a bit like a battery, like stored energy. It enables things to happen. Help us continue to make things happen and to make new and exciting things possible. Help us to make that possible here and elsewhere, for as churches, we are members of one another, in Christ. Playing on the American slang word for money, we could say, 'Give us more bread so we can build up your church and make the true, living bread more accessible, to more people, to heal the brokenness in ourselves and our world.'