

Hungry for bread

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1 Kings 19: 4-8; Psalm 34: 1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35,41-51

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's crying with all her might and main
And she won't eat her dinner—rice pudding again —
What is the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
I've promised her dolls and a daisy chain,
And a book about animals—all in vain —
What is the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's perfectly well and hasn't a pain;
But look at her, now she's beginning again! —
What is the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
I've promised her sweets and a ride on the train,
And I've begged her to stop for a bit and explain —
What is the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's perfectly well and she hasn't a pain,
And it's lovely rice pudding for dinner again
What is the matter with Mary Jane?

(A.A. Milne. When we were very young, 1924)

Pretty obviously, little Mary Jane wanted dinner but had no appetite at all for English rice pudding—and I don't blame her one bit. The silly grown ups just couldn't understand that bland stodgy food would kill anyone's appetite. Little Mary Jane wanted real food, something with a good smell and an appetising taste.

Our parish dinner is coming up on the Saturday 26th and I have an appetite already. One of things I often like at a pot-luck feast is the many kinds of delicious bread.

Bread is one of the oldest prepared foods. The first breads were probably cooked from paste made by grinding grains with water—similar to tortillas, chapati, and Scots oatcake.

When Jesus said "I am the bread of life," it's this sort of bread his hearers might have thought of—something they ate every day, simple bread, but tasty—something you could bite into and chew, appetising and sustaining.

John chapter 6 is a connected narrative, 71 verses in all, telling of Jesus through themes of bread, food and eating—Jesus who fed the 5,000, Jesus as the bread from heaven and, later in the chapter, Jesus who gives his flesh and blood as spiritual food and drink. Our lectionary spreads this story over five weeks of readings.

Last week we read of Jesus teaching his hearers to look to him not for natural food, but "the food that endures for eternal life", which he would give them.

"Sir, give us this bread always," they said. Jesus answered, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Now, in today's reading, we find Jesus' critics asking "How can he say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" But Jesus repeats his claim, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever..."

Bread made from wheat or barley flour was such a staple food in Palestine that the concepts of bread and food were almost interchangeable. This goes back as far as Genesis (3.19) "By the sweat of your face", God said to Adam, "you shall eat bread until you return to the ground."

To share a meal, in many cultures, is spoken of as breaking bread together. Even more, bread speaks of all that we need for life and, in a way, of life itself. There are many examples in the Bible. In the Lord's Prayer, when we say, "Give us this day our daily bread", we are asking God not only for bread, not only just for food, but for all that we need for life.

When Jesus spoke of himself as bread, he was speaking of himself as all that we need for life—eternal life. Particularly in John, eternal life, abundant life, resurrection life, doesn't begin after death. It begins in this life. It comes from eating the bread now, from taking in Jesus. It is, of course, a metaphor, an image. There are a number of metaphors of Jesus as a giver of life. The controversial image of Jesus as mother is very ancient one in Christian tradition, for example. Jesus is like a mother because he brings forth, gives birth, to new life.

I was talking about an appetite for delicious bread, bread that smells and tastes wonderful. An appetite for Jesus and appetite for life and can be very much the same thing. But when I talk of appetite for Jesus as appetite for life and vice versa, I don't mean everything that happens to us. Not all experience is life-giving—war, hatred, violence, murder so on. On the other hand some unpleasant experiences are nevertheless healthy—like going to the dentist. In Christ we desire every good thing that gives and nourishes life.

God is a God of life—abundant life, rich life, full life, appetising life. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly", Jesus said. (John 10.10)

At the time in his life we heard about in this morning's reading, Elijah's life wasn't too abundant. He was fresh from his spectacular triumph over the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel, but now Queen Jezebel had announced her intention to kill him. Elijah fled into the wilderness, sat under a tree, declared himself a failure, and asked God that he might die. Then he went to sleep.

But the angel of God, the Spirit, touched him—poked him in the ribs perhaps—and told him to get up and eat. There was a cake—bread—baked on hot stones, delicious, and a jar of water.

I wonder how much appetite Elijah had. Not much I suspect. But he ate something and went back to sleep. But once again, prod, prod, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

On the strength of the two meals, Elijah lasted 40 days and 40 nights and went to Horeb, where God commissioned him for his next task. It seems he needed to be stirred by the Spirit to get back his appetite. Or perhaps he simply ate in obedience to the Spirit. Either way, the food gave him the strength and energy he needed.

We won't have much strength for work, for life, if we neglect the food God puts before us in Jesus Christ. But what if, like Elijah, we have lost some of our appetite for life and work?

We can carry on dutifully taking in just enough to keep going, doing what's necessary, as much through habit as anything else. But I believe that Jesus encourages us to have an appetite for life, with joy, enthusiasm and courage.

An appetite for Christ and an appetite for good life go together. They strengthen each other.

Rather than the apparent demands of everyday life and the apparent demands of God competing with each other, our everyday experiences need to give a desire for God and our experience of God to give zest for life.

If I think little of my own need of God, I will be still less aware of others' need of God's love. If I do not consider my own need to be at peace with God, so much the less will I be a minister of reconciliation—a ministry to which we are all called.

We want to bless others. But, like Elijah, we need to take time to refresh and strengthen ourselves for the journey. So what can we do to keep a keen desire for God, to stimulate appetite for life and for Christ? How can we receive from God a new appetite for God's self and for life?

Well, I am no expert on diet. In fact I'm about 15 kilograms away from being an expert on diet. But here are a few thoughts.

Rather than stimulating appetite, a complex diet of rich foods can kill appetite. Despite the variety, after a while it all begins to seem too heavy and all the same. For some of us, appetite could be improved by simplifying our diet. Bread is not a complex food, yet it has great variety.

Simplify, simplify, simplify. Sometimes we need to be strict with ourselves to separate activities and possessions that give us life from those that are just an extra burden and an unnecessary nuisance.

On the other hand, some of us lack appetite because our diet is boring—too bland, repetitious and plain. Some can afford only simple food. But often even the humblest food can be made appealing. Perhaps we need to find new yet simple ways to enjoy nature, the company of others, interesting ideas, creative thought, action and prayer.

Most of the time, fresh food is best. We need freshness in life, too—to go out and enjoy the garden today, not just remember smelling a rose a month ago. We need to let God be present in prayer and quietness afresh daily.

Old-fashioned bread, free of chemical preservatives, doesn't keep long, unless it is very dry. The manna that God gave in the wilderness stayed fresh only one day.

Some aged food and drink is superb—cheese, pickles, kim chee, mature wine, dried fruit. We need the lessons of the past, traditions and memories. But without freshness and renewal, we will die.

To digest bread easily you need to chew thoroughly! To get the most out of our experience of God and of life, we need to chew, to reflect, to take stock. Is our daily life inviting to us—appetising, so to speak?

To finish; I wonder if anyone remembers another old children's verse, this time by Walter de la Mare? We become what we eat and what we eat becomes us.

It's a very odd thing—

As odd can be—

That whatever Miss T eats

Turns into Miss T.;

Porridge and apples,

Mince, muffins and mutton,

Jam, junket, jumbles—

Not a rap, not a button

It matters; the moment
They're out of her plate,
Though shared by Miss Butcher
And sour Mr. Bate;
Tiny and cheerful,
And neat as can be,
Whatever Miss T. eats
Turns into Miss T.
(Peacock Pie, 1913)

Do we have a thirst and an appetite for life, for Christ, for Jesus? Because what we eat becomes us and we become what we eat.

And to God we give thanks. Amen.