

Sermon: *God Lifts Us Up*
Philip Garside 8 Aug 2021

“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.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.”

Let’s pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable to you O God, our foundation and our liberator. Amen.

I have titled this sermon: God Lifts Us Up, God Lifts Us Up

In his book *The Evolution of the Word*, Marcus Borg suggests that the letter to the Ephesians was not written by the apostle Paul, but was written a generation or so after he died. The writer was a member of a Christian community who wanted to present, and keep alive, Paul’s teaching for the next generation.

Despite the title of the letter, scholars are not sure that it was actually addressed to the Christians in Ephesus. The earliest copies of the letter open with, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus”, with no mention of Ephesus. So the letter was intended for a wider audience of followers of Jesus around the eastern Mediterranean. Extending the audience further over time and place, what might today’s reading from the letter say to us here today?

In tone it is like the 10 Commandments, in that it sets out rules for living peacefully as a community of faith. Let’s look at some of the details:

Don’t tell lies about or to other people – only tell the truth. If we have a habit of not being truthful in what we say, then other people will not believe or respect or trust us. However, when we do speak the truth, we should also be kind and consider the affect that our words could have on other people. It may be better to say nothing sometimes. Words are powerful. We should use them wisely.

Be angry but do not sin. Notice that the letter doesn’t say “don’t be angry.” It is natural to be angry with someone who wrongs us personally, or with the government if we feel its policies and actions are unjust. The issue is about what we do with our anger. If our anger leads us to violently attack someone physically, or to speak in an uncaring and thoughtless way to another person, then we are making the situation worse.

Instead we should deal with our anger quickly – the same day – and not let it fester. We need to show emotional maturity and act in a way that doesn’t do lasting harm to ourselves or other people. This is a hard lesson, and it takes time to learn it.

We are told to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. If we can forgive someone who has wronged us and made us angry, then we no longer carry that burden inside us and can make a fresh start in our relationship with that person. Our forgiveness also lifts the burden from the other person.

The phrase “in Christ” is one that Paul used often. Paul, in his authentic letters, says very little about Jesus’ life and teachings. Paul’s emphasis was on how communities of Jesus followers should live and act toward one another, as one “in” or “with” Christ.

The letter goes on to say that we should, “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” The keyword here is “up.” Jesus gave himself “up” for us, when God lifted Jesus “up” at the resurrection. Paul’s theme that we are together “in Christ,” provides a first link to our theme that “God Lifts Us Up.”

Our reading from John contains one of the seven “I am” statements which are a central part of this gospel. “I am the bread of life.” It is thought that John’s gospel was written in the 90s or around the turn of the first century – two or three generations after Jesus died. The synoptic gospels Mark, Matthew and Luke introduce the life, sayings and teachings of Jesus, to audiences of Jewish or gentile people. Jesus’ parables and pithy one liners, as recorded in those three gospels, give us the gist of what Jesus said.

John’s gospel is different. It arises from a mature, established Christian faith community, who has split entirely from the synagogue and the Jewish religion. John’s gospel presents new theological ideas about Christ, and its language reflects this.

Bread is a fundamental food that helps to keep us alive. It is a staple like rice or pasta or taro or kumara or potatoes.

We celebrate the idea of Jesus being the bread of life when we take part in communion.

Without bread (or other staples) we starve.

Looking ahead to our future, the climate crisis is threatening our food supply. When there is drought and not enough water for irrigation, farmers can’t grow crops. Insect pests thrive in the warmer climate. Farmers in Africa face having their crops eaten by plagues of locusts – leaving nothing for people. Food security is already being threatened today.

Too much good food is also a problem. I did a blood test 3 weeks ago. When my doctor phoned with results, she had a blunt message: lose a quarter of your body weight or you will get diabetes and die. And my arteries are getting clogged too. I need to get down to 100 kgs and stay there.

I know what to do. That was my weight 15 years ago. Losing weight is boring. No snacks, no second helpings, no puddings. Walk more. Feel a bit hungry all the time. Boring, boring, boring. But it is better than the alternative – dying too soon.

What fills us up – spiritually and physically? What do we value? What do we desire?

The reading challenges us to look carefully at all the things we ingest – not just food, but attitudes, gossip, negative stuff.

We should let our faith nourish us and empower us to do good.

When we were in our early 20s the young adults group here at Wesley had a great idea to run a drop-in coffee bar on Friday nights. We called it The Troffe [spell it out] – Troffe is Effort spelled backwards. We painted an upstairs lounge, prepared food and coffee and ... no one came – except the Tongan congregation's rugby team, who cheerfully bought and devoured the cakes and coffee we made each Friday night. As an outreach to the wider community it didn't work.

A book I read recently, *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the church right where you are* by Tim Soerens, has some advice that we could have used then.

When a parish, or congregation, has a desire to get more involved in the community around them, Soerens suggests we should first be filled with curiosity about what God is already doing in our local area. It might be other Christians or members of other faiths, or people of no stated faith, who are doing good work – who are quietly and lovingly helping and serving others. Rather than starting our own projects and ministries from scratch we should join in with what is happening already. See where this leads. Keep an open mind.

District Superintendent Rob Ferguson talked to us last Sunday about his ministry in Christchurch, of walking around the community with eyes, ears and heart open.

Some of Desmond Cooper's time when he was our minister was spent in a similar community facing ministry.

We haven't had our own minister for our congregation this year and it has been easy to feel that we are in crisis mode, as we wonder about our future.

Let's look at our Psalm for today. As happens in many Psalms, the first half is a lament, full of fear of being abandoned by God. [read the first 2 stanzas.]

Psalm 130 – Waiting for Divine Redemption (NRSV)

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

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As is also typical in many Psalms, the second half changes tack and tone. It is full of hope.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Take a moment to think about the ways God is blessing us?

Rob had some good news for us, that it is possible that we could have our own minister from 2022 onwards. It was unexpected.

I could feel the relief of our leaders and fellow congregation members around the meeting room. We have worked faithfully worshipping together and being in fellowship.

And now God has lifted us up.

Lifted us up to continue to be a strong community of faith in the central city.

Lifted us up to dare to dream of a new ministry in another suburb.

As we sang in the round earlier: We are happy to have work to do, serving the Lord. Amen.