

PENN FREE METHODIST CHURCH

Bible Study 1st April 2020

John 6, v22-35

The non-believer's spiritual inadequacy, and the solution in Christ

v22. The day following, when the people which stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was none other boat there, save that one whereinto his disciples were entered, and that Jesus went not with his disciples into the boat, but that his disciples were gone away alone. The reference is to the day following the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. The people are puzzled as to the Lord's whereabouts. They cannot see Him on their side of the Sea of Galilee, yet they knew that He had not set sail with His disciples. They are located on the more thinly populated eastern side of the lake, anxious to find the man who had fed them so well the day before, and whom they desire to be their new king.

v23. (Howbeit there came other boats from Tiberias nigh unto the place where they did eat bread, after that the Lord had given thanks:) Those who owned boats and who were from Tiberias, which was in the western bank of the Sea of Galilee, realise that there are many people on the eastern banks who will need to be ferried back to their homes on the western shores. So, perceiving an opportunity for business, they sail over to where the people are to take them back.

v24. When the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, neither his disciples, they also took shipping, and came to Capernaum, seeking for Jesus. The crowds embark into the boats to head for Capernaum, which was at the northern end of the Sea, and was the town in which the Lord had made his base.

v25. And when they had found him on the other side of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when camest thou hither? The people were mystified as to how the Lord had managed to reach Capernaum. They had not seen him take the road in the early morning light, and they knew that he had not sailed over the lake with His disciples.

v26. “Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled”. The Lord now rebukes the crowds, because they are following Him for the wrong reasons. Many of them were doubtless poor, not usually eating particularly well, and so they had never known quite such a filling and satisfying meal as the loaves and fishes which they had enjoyed the day before. They are now following the Lord, hoping to enjoy another feast for their stomachs received from his hands, and because they hope that He will be a great earthly King. They are not following Him, however, for the good of their souls. In this they are typical of the unbeliever today, failing to think about the most urgent matter of all, a mans’s relationship to his Maker.

v27. “Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed”. The word ‘meat’ here is used in the context of food generally. The Lord tells them that they must not just be preoccupied with their bodily needs and with the other passing things of this world. They need spiritual food as well. How people today must realise this, but most do not. The liberal secular establishment, along with many churches, speak much of the need to

abolish poverty and include social conditions, but there needs to be an emphasis upon man's desperate spiritual poverty, and upon the eternal consequences of that poverty. All without Christ are dying from spiritual starvation, because all are sinful and alienated from God.

The Lord, however, has not made it difficult for men to believe. In His grace, He draws men to himself using simple, straightforward means. There is the witness of the natural world all around us, which people are meant to observe and conclude that there must be a creator God behind it all. There is the work of the Holy Spirit upon men's consciences, moving them to consider their own sin, and that they are answerable to God. And then there is the most direct and straightforward method of all, the preaching of the Gospel, drawing men to the faith in the Saviour.

So many people, however, ignore these straightforward and relatively painless means of coming to God. Therefore, God also has other means, far more rigorous and unpleasant. He can remove men's earthly comforts, all the various material supports on which they rely for their happiness in their God-rejecting lives. He can remove the prosperity and general well-being which make it so easy for men to forget about God. He can also afflict whole nations by the removal of peace, security and economic thriving. He can chastise people in whatever way He wishes, and so all who ignore Him, and who think only in terms of this present world, should stop and consider the counsel given here : "Labour not for the meat which perisheth". Stop focusing only on the present and the material, or as the Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount,

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these (material) things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

v28. "Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" So being confronted with the issue of everlasting life, the crowd immediately thinks in terms of works that they have to do in order to merit that prize. What aspect of the law of

Moses should they in particular attend to? There certainly seems to be no anxiety on their part that the demands of the law will be far too high for them to meet, nor any anxiety about having hopelessly broken God's law already. This is doubtless indicative of the poor teaching which they had been receiving, for they seem unaware of their own awful sinfulness, and seem to have a false confidence in their ability to keep God's law. They are relying on their own works and goodness, which can never save them. So the Lord has to point them away from their man-pleasing, pride-inducing works to faith in Himself. They are outwardly religious, and this has made them confident, but they do not realise the true state of their hearts. They think that some further outward religious performances will make them acceptable to God.

v29. “Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent”. What God requires you to do for salvation is to believe in me, and from your heart. Nothing can earn a man a place in heaven : no rigours of monastic discipline, no great charitable deed, no religious rites and rituals, no conformity to society's standards of virtue. The people need to abandon all thoughts of their own goodness. Their own pathetic works or shows of outward goodness are not the "meat which endureth to everlasting life". They must trust in the Son of God for mercy, and He will give them the true spiritual food.

v30. “They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?” Now these people have already witnessed the Lord's healing miracles; they have also just seen the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They have also heard the Lord's authoritative teaching, but they still demand to see yet greater signs of His authority. Their hardness of heart makes them think that Jesus has not yet done enough to convince them. If they are going to believe, it must be on their terms, and not according to the revelation which God has already chosen to give, but as the Lord said on another occasion,

"An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign" (Matthew 12:39). This is typical of the unbeliever today, who will often claim that his unbelief is justifiable, because God has given him insufficient evidence.

v31. "Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat". So, the crowd says to Jesus, You may have multiplied five loaves and two fishes into a meal large enough to feed thousands, but you have not performed any miracle the like of which Moses performed, when he gave us the manna in the wilderness. You have not caused bread to rain down from heaven. They are missing the Lord's point entirely. They are still thinking about literal food, even though Jesus has specifically spoken of "the meat that endureth unto everlasting life". They are effectively saying, Show us a miracle which brings down literal loaves from the sky, and then we might believe in you.

v32. "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven". The Lord replies that it was not Moses who provided the manna to the Israelites, but God the Father. "Second(ly), the manna was not the true bread from heaven ... (it) was merely a type which foreshadowed the ultimate true (and spiritual) bread" ¹. The Lord is speaking of the bread which feeds the soul. The manna was indeed a wonderful food which nourished Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. It was food the like of which men had never seen before, for it was nothing less than the miraculous creation of God. Nevertheless, it was still only literal, physical food for the temporary sustaining of the body. It was not the *spiritual* food of which the Lord is now speaking. It was only a symbol of the true spiritual food which confers everlasting life, but says the Lord, I am now speaking of a bread which makes you live for ever, and it is my Father who gives you this true bread from heaven. This is what you need. You should be following me for this true bread. But how slow they were to understand.

v33. “For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world”. God has spiritual bread to give to you in One whose origin is from heaven itself.

v34. “Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread”. Here we see that the crowd do not properly understand what the Lord is saying. They are still only thinking in terms of physical food, albeit food with some kind of special life-sustaining properties. This, then, is not a genuine expression of *spiritual* desire, because we find them rejecting the Lord's spiritual meaning further on.

“The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:41). The Jews at this time had a very earthly and sensual view of the kingdom of God. They believed that when the Messiah came, an earthly kingdom of Israel would be established, and that it would be a time of great physical feasting, and so it is that context of an earthly focus and benefit that they say, "Lord, evermore give us this bread". How slow they are to apprehend the *spiritual* truth behind the Lord's words.

v35. “Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst”. So the Lord, having explained fallen man's great need for *spiritual* food now specifically identifies that food. It is he himself. He is the spiritual bread which, if eaten, confers everlasting life. If men wish to live for evermore, then they must come to Christ, which means that they must acknowledge their personal lack of any goodness before God, and that, because of their sin, they are spiritually starving. They must abandon all reliance upon their own works, and must turn to Christ, who alone is their Saviour. They must, spiritually speaking, eat of Christ, the Bread of Life, for he died in the sinner's place, and he bore the sinner's penalty. Just as the Israelites in Egypt ate unleavened bread, and so were redeemed from their slavery, so those who eat of Christ, are redeemed from their slavery to sin and to Satan. This is the Gospel.

The miraculous feeding of the people had been a sign to lead them into spiritual truth, but they had failed to use it as such. We must remember that the feeding of the 5000 was performed in the context of compassion for sheep without a shepherd, in the context of compassion for those in spiritual darkness. So we should not view the miracle as simply demonstrating the Lord's dealing with physical hunger. That would be to miss so much. This miracle is meant to lead men to faith in the Son of God, He who alone can remove their spiritual darkness. It continues to be a challenge to the unbeliever today : Do you realise that the man who transformed those five loaves and two fishes into enough food to feed a multitude was proving Himself to be the eternal Son of God, the One who is giving you your daily food right now? He is the One who created the earth; the One who gave you life itself; the One who controls our earthly existence and everything about our human bodies. He is also the One who demands your allegiance.

This passage teaches us much about the non-believer's wretched spiritual inadequacy. We observe here his failure to realise his spiritual need, his failure to listen to God's voice, his misplaced confidence in his own virtue, his unjustified constant demands for further evidence, before he will believe, his spiritual dullness and slowness to apprehend spiritual truth. The only way that the non-Christian can be rescued from this dangerous spiritual inadequacy is for him to acknowledge his spiritual hunger and to come in repentance and faith to Him who is the bread of life, the Lord Jesus Christ, He who alone feed him so that he will live for evermore. So this passage encapsulates the message which we must proclaim to all non-believers today : Do not focus solely upon your bodily needs and earthly existence, upon "the meat which perisheth", but rather come to Him who has "the meat which endureth unto everlasting life".

¹ John MacArthur, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, John 1:1-11, Moody Publishers, p244