

In our home Christmas celebrations include two dishes with separate and somewhat surprising cultural background. On my beloved's side of the family there is a Danish heritage among others, so we finish Christmas Dinner not with traditional Christmas pudding but a dish made with rice and almonds and cream and cherries. It's called ris al'mond which means rice with almonds. My side of the family includes a Dutch connection via Sri Lanka so on Christmas morning we have a cakey kind of bread made with yeast and eggs and sultanas and eaten with Edam cheese. It's called bruedher which means 'bread'.

Food is an important part of Christmas celebrations in virtually every place where Christmas is celebrated. But if you listened closely to the reading we've just had, you may have picked up that Christmas is all about food. A special food, certainly, bread from heaven.

We've sung the Christmas story in our carols this morning. The angels appearing, the shepherds rejoicing, a mother trusting and hoping. But grown up, the baby born in a stable speaks about his birth in this way.

In Jn 6, Jesus says twice, I am the bread of life (in v 35 and 48)

V41 I am the bread that came down from heaven

And the last line of the passage, v51 Jesus says I am the living bread that came down from heaven. This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world.

Here's Christmas from the one whose birth it was. Bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Food that satisfies. God with us. Hope amidst the wreckage.

I just want to think about this under two headings - Missing Christmas and Receiving Christmas.

First, Missing Christmas.

In a stunning case of life imitating art imitating life, Christmas in Oz this year has turned into our own closing sequence from Love Actually as people have flung themselves into the arms of loved one at airports and border crossings around the country. I need hardly say that it has been a year of painful disappointment and weariness, not least of all because so many of us have been separated from people we love. We've missed each other and its sapped the life out of us. And in this section of Joh's Gospel Jesus warns us about the risk of missing Christmas.

There are two groups of people in this passage that miss Christmas. First there is the group that Jesus criticises in v 26 when he says, you are looking for me because you ate the loaves and had your fill; then there's the group in v 41 who we're told, 'grumble because Jesus said I am the bread that came down from heaven'. So there's the hungry ones and there's the grumblers. And that's how we know it's a Christmas story.

But the point about these two groups is that they both miss Christmas, although for different reasons.

The hungry ones miss Christmas because they are looking for the wrong kind of food.

Bread is on people's minds in this episode because it takes place the day after the famous feeding of the five thousand miracle. You and I might find it hard to believe in the miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand from just a few loaves and a couple of fish; but its the people who ate that food to whom Jesus says, 'you have seen me and still you do not believe.'

They ate the bread from the miracle, but they missed the point of the miracle. The point of the miracle was not - you can get a feed from Jesus. The point of the miracle was *Feed on Jesus*. He is the one who can satisfy the deepest longings and desires of humans, he is the one whom God has sent to be our life, our joy, our comfort and forgiveness, our hope and strength and wisdom and crown.

That is what Jesus means when he says in v 35

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

We have hunger and thirst beyond the needs of our bodies for sustenance. But now as then, we fall into the trap of seeking to satisfy the deep hunger and thirst of our souls, with food that cannot satisfy. Jesus says to the hungry in v 26 do not labour for food that perishes but for food that endures to eternal life.

Not just life that goes on forever, but life that is really life, life that is deeply satisfied.

That's the problem with appetite isn't it? It's never satisfied. We get hungry, we eat our fill. We eat our fill until there is food left over that we cannot eat But we don't throw away the leftovers do we? No - we don't throw it away - because tomorrow we will be hungry again. It doesn't matter how full you get, tomorrow you will search for food again, because your hunger will have returned.

I'm a fan of the ABC TV show, Gruen in which a panel of marketing experts discuss advertising. 11 billion dollars spent on advertising annually in Oz and its sole purpose is to connect the deepest longings of our hearts with stuff that's for sale.

Scott Bedbury is the guru behind brands like Nike and Starbucks. Bedbury says in today's world advertising seeks to understand deep psychological matters like "yearning to belong, needing to feel connected, hoping to transcend, desiring to experience joy and fulfillment". He says, to be successful companies need to tap into our innate desires, placed in us from

the moment we are born. They know we are searching for meaning and they are willing to help us find it - for a price.

So Apple doesn't flog computers, they're offering chic; and Nike don't sell joggers - they promise health and youth. But the irony that undergirds advertising is that they know that no matter how much we buy we're not going to be satisfied – we're always up for buying more.

But v 27 Jesus says do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

Jesus claims to satisfy the appetite of the human heart for relationship with God, for forgiveness, for belonging, for meaning, for satisfaction, and joy and purpose. But the crowd by the lake missed it because they were dominated by their earthly appetites. And today among the crowds many do not believe because they are dominated by their earthly appetites. We seek the satisfaction of our deepest needs in the wrong food. And we miss Christmas.

But Jesus explains Christmas this way (v35) I am the bread of life that came down from heaven to give life to the world. Jesus is the food that satisfies.

The second group to miss Christmas were the grumblers.

v41

At this some began to grumble about him, because he said "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I came down from heaven?"

In Jesus' day, the very idea that God could be born as a human being; that the Creator of the galaxies could be confined to a womb, was distasteful to the romans and blasphemous to the Jews. They were not gullible bronze-age people – they were skeptics. And these grumblers say 'Nothing to see here' It's just Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter

It has often been observed that one of the main differences between Jesus and every other religious teacher is Jesus' focus in his teaching on himself. Every other religious leader is a person who directs their followers away from themselves and towards the truth that they proclaim, but Jesus presents himself as the Truth. The Buddha says, I am not your refuge. You must be your refuge. Moses says, Hear O Israel the Lord your God is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. The prophet Mohammed says, Worship Allah.

But Jesus says v35

I am the bread of life, whoever *comes to me* will never be hungry and whoever *believes in me* will never be thirsty.

Moses does not say whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Mohammed does not say whoever come to me will never be hungry. The Buddha does not say whoever comes to me will never be hungry. But Jesus says – I am the bread of life; I am the gate; I am the good shepherd; I am the Resurrection and the life

I know you have a hunger in your heart I know you have a thirst for God i know you have a yearning for eternity - and you will satisfy all your longing for a way home, a truth to live by, a life that is authentic and deep - if you come to me. It is astonishing and unique. It explains CS Lewis' challenge that either Jesus is an utterly deluded, egocentric and bad man, or he is the living God

v 33 I am the bread of life that came down from heaven and gives life to the world

But, this was the bread that some could not swallow. Jesus was a local lad. The son of Mary and Joseph - the carpenter. He did not receive tablets from heaven like Moses, he did not take dictation from the archangel Gabriel like Mohammed he did not receive magic spectacles like Joseph Smith the founder of the Mormons. This was just Jesus – and

before long he would be crucified – condemned as a heretic and executed as a rebel by the Roman Empire.

They grumbled at him when he said he was the bread of heaven, because he was all too human. Indeed, he was not less than human. In Jesus God knows humanity from the inside – knows our longings and fears and sorrows and temptations, though without sin; weariness, hunger, thirst, betrayal, abandonment and death – he knew what it was to be us, but no mere man. And yet today too, there are those who miss Christmas, because for them, Jesus is just a man.

Perhaps a revolutionary sect leader, perhaps a wandering shepherd mystic, perhaps the greatest man who ever lived, but in the end just a man. But Jesus claims to be so much more.

The bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. God with us. It is the reason that Christmas is the news we need. It has been a year in so many ways of grief and loss. The nation has been stunned by tragedy even in recent days and our hearts go out to the broken hearted. Are we alone with our grief? Our loss. Our inability to make sense of our sorrows. Are we alone in a cold dark meaningless universe? Jesus says, I am the bread of life that comes down from heaven. God with us. With us – *we are not alone. With us – we matter to him.*

Now as then, there are those who miss Christmas because they are devoted to the pursuit of food that cannot satisfy. And there are those who miss Christmas because they cannot see in Jesus more than themselves. They cannot see what God has provided in sending his Son.

So finally, how can we receive Christmas today? Receiving Christmas.

Christmas is after all, about food - it is about feasting on Christ. And Christmas is about giving and receiving. It is about what God has given and what we may receive.

The crowd ask Jesus v 28 What must we do to do the works that God requires?

Jesus replies, The work of God is this: to *believe* in the one he has sent. v29

Jesus puts it another way in v 35 *Whoever comes to me* will never go hungry and *whoever believes in me* will never be thirsty

And he puts it another way in v 40 For my father's will is that everyone *who looks to the Son and believes in him* shall have eternal life

And again in v 51 I am the bread that came down from heaven *whoever eats this bread* will live forever.

Come look believe eat – they are metaphors for the same thing – trusting in Jesus.

Making him the focus of your attention; letting him get inside your heart and your head; allowing him to fill your horizons; placing your confidence, hope and trust in him. Lord and saviour, food and life, master and friend, treasure and crown.

If we are to receive Christmas, we must receive Jesus, whom God has sent. The Word made flesh, God comes among us as one of us, for our sakes. The invitation is personal not religious. Know me - not practice these rituals. The invitation is relational not transactional. Look to me, not keep these rules.

Jesus comes into the world at Christmas to do the work that God requires.v51 *This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world.* It is not our works that bring us to God, but the flesh that Jesus gives, the death that he dies that wins the life of the world.

He is bread - that we may feed on him, he gives life to the world that we may have life in his name, he gives his flesh that death may be put to death, he comes from heaven that we might know God, he has the father's seal of approval that God's favour may rest on us, he the Son who is sent, that we may be adopted as children, he does the will of his father that none of those who the father gives will be lost.

If you are conscious that you are ever hungry and never satisfied; if it seems to you that Jesus is more than just the son of Mary and Joseph; then don't miss Christmas. Seek the Son who was sent for you. If you want help with that, by all means get in touch with us, we'd be only too happy to help. But otherwise, why not pick up a bible and read your way through John's gospel over the break?

Jesus says, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. He does not mean, after today's lunch you will never need to eat again; he means when you come to me, your heart has found its home.

I hope there's food to share on your Christmas table today, and people you love sitting around it. But whatever you do, don't miss Christmas.

Jesus says I am the bread of life that gives life to the world. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.

A safe and Happy Christmas to you and those you love.