

SESSION ONE:
YOUR ANCESTORS ATE MANNA IN THE
WILDERNESS

pilgrum

In this session we are looking at worship as communion with God.

Opening Prayers

I am the bread of life,
anyone who comes to me shall not hunger,
anyone who believes in me shall never thirst.

Alleluia. Lord, give us this bread always.

The bread of God comes down from heaven,
and gives life to the world.

Alleluia. Lord, give us this bread always.

Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life
And I will raise him up on the last day.

Alleluia. Lord, give us this bread always.

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail.
The words I speak, they are spirit and they are life.

Alleluia. Lord, give us this bread always.

Walk with us, Lord,
Along the road of resurrection!
Explain for us, so slow to believe,
the things that scripture says of you.
Break the bread of the Eucharist with us
whenever we share our lives with our brothers and sisters.
Stay with us each time night approaches
and the daylight fades in our hearts.

Amen.

Conversation

If someone stopped you in the street and asked, why do you worship, what is it for, how would you reply? And what have been your best and most moving experiences of worship?

Reflecting on Scripture

Reading

Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' ⁵³So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'

JOHN 6.48–58

Explanatory note

In this passage Jesus is referring to the story in Exodus 16.1–36, in which God's people, having just escaped from slavery in Egypt, found themselves in the desert with no food. God miraculously fed them with quail and with a pale, flaky substance that they called manna (the word means literally 'what now?').

- Read the passage through once
- Keep a few moments' silence
- Read the passage a second time with different voices
- Invite everyone to say aloud a word or phrase that strikes them

- Read the passage a third time
- Share together what this word or phrase might mean and what questions it raises

Reflection

STEPHEN COTTRELL

When I was a stranger you welcomed me

One of the most basic, but often overlooked, symbols of the Christian faith is a table. Think of almost any church you have been into and you will find one. Sometimes it is very grand, high and lifted up and bedecked with candles; sometimes it is plain and unadorned. But it is there for a reason. It signifies one of the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith: that we are welcome; that in the words of Jesus on the night before he died, 'there is a place prepared for us' (see John 14.2). In Jesus, God has done everything that is needed for us to enjoy eternal life with him. That being welcomed into the life of God is symbolized by the table. As we shall see in a later session, it is also a foreshadowing of the banquet of heaven itself.

And Christian worship is very often gathered around the table in the service we call the Eucharist or Holy Communion or The Lord's Supper. Like the very first Christians we worship by coming together to break bread (Acts 20.7). It is the basic act of Christian worship, instituted by Jesus himself on the night before he died.

It is also very human. Meeting to eat is a wonderful way to bring people together. But it's not just the food itself that creates hospitality – think of canteen meals! Good hosts offer friendship too; the eating and being together around the table create that hospitable place, where conversations can occur and relationships develop.

In the Eucharist God offers us such hospitality: God is the host, and we are the guests.

The service of Holy Communion has two distinct parts –

- **The Liturgy of the Word** (the readings from Scripture, the sermon, the Creed and the Intercessions).
- **The Liturgy of the Sacrament** (the Peace, the Preparation of the Table, the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving over the bread and wine, the Lord's Prayer, the breaking of the bread and the giving of Communion itself).

There are, as it were, two tables: the table where we gather to break open God's word; and the table where we gather to break open the bread. Around both these tables God gathers and feeds his people.

In the Church of England the Eucharist often begins with the words, 'The Lord is here!' God is taking the initiative. We gather around God's table and in God's presence. We don't need to invite God to join us. He is already here waiting to welcome us.

And, of course, God is everywhere – not just in church! God welcomes me wherever I am, so it is possible to worship anywhere and at any time. But the Sunday gathering of the Christian community is the place where this is made real. We Christians keep coming back to the table of the Lord because here we experience God's hospitality, and here we learn to be hospitable ourselves.

In short

In the Eucharist, God is the host and we are the guests. We gather around his table and learn from his hospitality how to be hospitable ourselves.

For discussion

- How has your life been enriched by hospitality? Share some experiences of welcoming others or being welcomed in yourself.
- What elements in the worship you have attended remind you of God's welcome?

I am with you always

Sometimes it is easy to sense God's presence in worship. There is a description of a time like this in Exodus 15. The Israelites had just escaped from the oppressive regime in Egypt, and had experienced high drama as Moses led them through the Red Sea. They 'saw the great work that the Lord did' and rejoiced at the signs of God's protection. Their enthusiastic song of praise and thanks was accompanied by tambourines and dancing. It was the very first 'happy clappy' service!

But life isn't always like that! When the Israelites arrived in the desert, they didn't feel like worshipping God there. They struggled with the ongoing realities of daily life in a new situation, and it is not surprising that they reacted as they did. Grumbles and complaints like theirs are classic symptoms of what is sometimes called 'culture shock' – the stresses that understandably occur when people have to adapt to new surroundings, bereft of a known way of life while simultaneously working out how to manage unfamiliar situations.

But God was already there in the desert – and welcomed them generously, just as they were. Manna was a completely unexpected gift,

Manna was a completely unexpected gift.

totally unplanned by them. All of them received God's generosity – not just a select few. As a whole community the Israelites were delivered from Egypt and fed in the desert, and this story became part of their 'salvation history'. In Psalm

78 we read how they retold this story together in worship to pass the memory down the generations. In John 6 Jesus too remembered this story and used it to talk about the gift that he brings to us.

Whether the service is a Eucharist or not, meeting in worship can be a time when we are reminded of God's continuing welcome to his people and of all that God has done to make that welcome possible. When we worship we retell the story of our faith. We remind ourselves of all the ways God has met with us. We bring to God our hopes and needs, our joys and fears. God is our gracious host. God doesn't just welcome everyone. He welcomes everything about us.

In short

All services – whether a Eucharist or not – are times when we are reminded that God welcomes us as his people just as we are.

For discussion

- How do you feel that God is with you when you worship?
- What are the other times in your life when you have been aware of God's provision and welcome? How have these times become part of your own story? And how is it changing you?

Journeying On

During this next week, think about how the welcome you receive from God in worship can be imitated in your daily life in the welcome and hospitality you offer to others – strangers as well as fellow pilgrims. We will share with each other any conclusions we have come to at the start of the next session. And if you haven't done so already, get hold of a Holy Communion service booklet from your local church or download it from the internet and read through the service; see its structure and enjoy the beautiful language of its prayers.

Concluding Prayers

**The cup of blessing that we bless,
is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break,
is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread,
we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.**

1 CORINTHIANS 10.16-17

Merciful God

You have called us to your table

Generous God

You have fed us with the bread of life

Abundant God

Draw us and all people to the service of your Son;

And send us out to bring your peace and goodness to the world.

Amen.

Wisdom for the Journey

On Sundays we hold an assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or in the outlying districts. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us urging everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray. When we have finished praying, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks as well as possible, and the people give their assent by saying: 'Amen.' Then follows the distribution of the food over which the prayer of thanksgiving has been recited; everyone present receives some, and the deacons take some to those who are absent. The wealthy, if they wish, may make a contribution – they, themselves, decide the amount. The collection is placed in

the custody of the president, who uses it to help the orphans and widows and all who for any reason are in distress, whether because they are sick, in prison, or away from home.

JUSTIN (C.100–165)

Do you wish to honour the body of the saviour? Then do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honour it in church with silk vestments while outside you are leaving it numb with cold and naked. He who said, ‘This is my body’, and made it so by his word, is the same that said, ‘You saw me hungry and gave me no food. As you did it not to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it not to me.’ Honour him by sharing your property with the poor. What God needs is not golden cups but golden hearts.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (C.347–407)

The reason for our loving God *is* God. He is the initiator of our love and its final goal. God is loveable in himself and gives himself to us as the object of our love. He desires that our love for him should bring us happiness, and not be arid and barren. His love for us opens up inside us the way to love, and is the reward of our own reaching out in love. How gently he leads us in love’s way, how generously he returns the love we give, how sweet he is to those who wait for him!

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)

I hunger and I thirst:
Jesu, my manna be;
Ye living waters, burst
Out of the rock for me.

Thou bruised and broken Bread,
My life-long wants supply;
As living souls are fed,
O feed me, or I die.

J. S. B. MONSELL (1811–75)

The fundamental business of life is worship. At the root of all your being, your intellectual studies, the games you play, whatever it is, the impulse to do them well is and ought to be understood as being an impulse towards God, the source of all that is excellent. All life ought to be worship; and we know quite well there is no chance it will be worship unless we have times when we have worship and nothing else.

WILLIAM TEMPLE (1881-1944)