**God’s Gift for the helpless. John 6:35, 41-51**

Many people have been commenting on the drain that we are experiencing in facing the utter unpredictability of our lives at the moment. The rollercoaster of raised hopes and then crushing challenges is at best unsettling, and often provokes levels of distress and despair. We need hope that extends beyond the daily numbers and press conferences.

The readers of John’s gospel were encountering strong opposition to the early Christian movement. Persecution, imprisonment and even martyrdom were very real experiences for many of the early converts to Christianity. They needed a hope that extended beyond the realities of their everyday life. This gospel is developed against this backdrop.

The people who are talking with Jesus in this story had been part of the crowd when Jesus miraculously fed them with fish and bread. Now they are grumbling and murmuring amongst themselves. The people want a Messiah who would give them what they wanted. Initially they do not pose any direct questions to Jesus. Jesus responds to their state of mind, he was quite capable of responding to unspoken questions. Their grumbling and complaining is reminiscent of the Israelites in the wilderness.

**Jesus the Gift of God**

Jesus presents himself as the answer to their longings and their grumblings. He presents himself as “the bread of life”. Like the bread in the wilderness, this bread is provided by God, but this bread is Jesus himself, the gift of God to them and to us. They are being confronted by Jesus in a new way. They are called, drawn into a relationship with Jesus which can sustain them in all times and places.

Jesus’ miracles point them to the sort of thing God does, and therefore should help them to realise that Jesus is much more than just the son of Mary and Joseph. They point them to who Jesus is – God amongst them, not just to what he can do for them.

God was not just capable of providing physical food for them, God could provide spiritual nourishment which would keep their faith and hope alive. God does this now too. In our times of uncertainty, we need this steady source of nourishment from God.

**The Gift initiated by God**

God takes the initiative in sending Jesus to this world and God takes the initiative in drawing people to God’s self. Jesus tells his audience that their believing in him would be the result of God the Father drawing them to him. People come to Jesus because God takes the initiative and draws them.

“They are God’s gift to Jesus, and Jesus is God’s gift to them”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When we speak of people coming to faith in Jesus, we often speak of what they have done. However, this passage reminds us of the underlying essential reality, that God is at work drawing people to God’s self.

When C.S. Lewis reflected on how he came to faith in God, he has a strong emphasis on the work of God drawing him into this reality.

He says that “God closed in on me”.[[2]](#footnote-2) He spoke of “the steady unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I had greatly feared had come upon me. …I gave in, and admitted that God was God”[[3]](#footnote-3) he states that he was “perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

“I felt myself there and then being given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either…The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say “chose” yet it really did not seem possible to do the opposite.”[[5]](#footnote-5) God was at work and Lewis responded.

From a theological perspective Rudolph Bultmann describes it this way, “faith becomes possible when one abandons hold on one’s own security, and to abandon one’s security is nothing else than to let oneself be drawn by the Father.”[[6]](#footnote-6) “It occurs when man abandons his own judgement and “hears” and “learns” from the Father, when he allows God to speak to him. The drawing by the Father occurs not as it were *behind* man’s decision of faith but *in* it.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The Gift which brings nourishment from God**.

The gift of Jesus, the bread of life brings nourishment to Jesus followers. Jesus refers to a passage in Isaiah 54 where the prophet describes a renewal of faith in God which will occur amongst the Israelites who were in exile at that time. It speaks of God’s great love driving this renewal and of this renewal being freely available to any who would embrace it.[[8]](#footnote-8) These passages highlight the complete helplessness of the Israelites in captivity and their dependence on God to take the initiative to save them.

We don’t like to feel helpless, yet it is a significant part of our human experience. A part which we have often been less aware of due to the freedom and riches of this land in which we live. Yet this sense of widespread helplessness is something which our whole global population has needed to grapple with in the light of COVID. In the midst of helplessness, there is a great need to know that we will be sustained and a great need for hope for the future. The promises of Jesus in this passage, that they will never go hungry or thirsty if they come to him, are emphatic promises. God can keep their faith and love alive. God can sustain them as they follow Jesus. The passage also speaks of them all being “taught by God”[[9]](#footnote-9) and that this teaching draws them to faith in Jesus. In our times of helplessness, we are blessed to always have a teacher beside us, we always have the Presence of God with us ready to communicate with us.

**The Gift of fullness of life with God**

Finally Jesus speaks about this gift as a gift of life, fullness of life, eternal life. It is life which begins in the present and continues beyond death, the life of God’s kingdom, God’s rule over all things, the life that God has always envisaged for God’s creation. It is a “sharing in the inner life of Jesus that is on offer at once to anyone who believes”.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This life encompasses the concept of being “raised up on the last day” with Christ.[[11]](#footnote-11) In our age there is often not much conversation regarding life beyond this life. The age of rationalism seemed to squeeze such conversations out of the public arena, yet our faith in Christ encompasses faith in life, beyond life as we know it here and now. Indeed Paul in writing to the Corinthians stated, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Times of danger, calamity and uncertainty may bring these issues to the forefront of our minds. We need hope in the dark times, this passage encourages our hope and confidence in God who seeks us out, draws us to God’s self, sustains and nourishes us, speaks to us, teaches us, and gives us fullness of life begun here but continuing beyond this life, the life of God’s kingdom.

This time aside during lockdown may provide a good opportunity to intentionally consider what God has given to us in Jesus, and to devote some time to listening to God that we may be nourished by God.

1. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John: The new International Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010) 385 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C. S. Lewis *Surprised by Joy,* (London: Collins Fontana books, 1959) 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lewis *Surprised by Joy,* 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lewis *Surprised by Joy,*  182 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lewis *Surprised by Joy,* 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971) 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,*231-232 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone Part One,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 83 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John 6:45 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wright, *John for Everyone Part One,* 83 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John 6:44b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 1 Corinthians 15:9 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-12)