

“Bread for the Journey of Life”

Introduction

It is still young, the new year. We have dreams and wishes, visions and options. And we all need to be nourished for the paths which lie ahead. We need strength and courage to face the road before us, to face the joys and concerns which will come, and all the big and small surprises which life holds in store for us.

We need bread. Bread for the journey of life...

Bread to still our physical hunger, but also bread to feed our hungry souls and minds.

And what we do in this situation is, we look at our Bible and at the people who eat and share bread there...

We look at the Old and New Testament. And we meet Elijah and the angel, Ruth and Naomi, the wife of Jairus, and healed Bartimaeus when he follows Jesus on the road to Jerusalem...

Reading 1

1 Kings 19: 5-8

5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, «Get up and eat.»

6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, «Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.»

8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Meditation 1

I bring you the bread which helped Elijah out of a deep depression...

Elijah, a man full of fire and perhaps the greatest prophet of the OT, was going through a crisis. In a mighty struggle he'd triumphed over the priests of Baal and wiped them all out. He seemed to be at the highpoint of his success.

But then Queen Jezebel was after his blood. And Elijah was suddenly full of fear.

He lost his will for life, his energy to carry on.

He fled to the desert to save his life. And there in the loneliness of the desert all the burdens and painful moments of his life catch up with him.

He simply wants to die.

He has had enough of fighting. He cannot go on any longer. He sees no way out but death.

Elijah's whole concept of life had fallen apart, his ideals and all he'd believed in. In this hopeless situation he is unable to go any further.

And at the moment when he is unable to help himself, when he sees no way out, an angel comes to him and touches him. The angel wakes Elijah up, and shows him the water & bread he'd brought along.

It reveals to Elijah a power that doesn't come from within himself.

Bread & water in this story are the signs of the transformation that takes place in Elijah, when the angel touches him in his hopelessness and wakes him up.

And although Elijah understands the message of the angel, - he eats and drinks - he still lies down and goes back to sleep again. Obviously in such a crisis it is not enough that the angel only touches you once...

I am sure, many of us can recognize ourselves in Elijah under the broom tree. We all have experienced times when we were sick and tired of everything, when we reached our limit, came to a dead end and faced times of darkness from which we did not find a way out through our own power.

Life stories destroyed. Families fallen apart. Children go their own way. Partners leave. We have exhausted our energies and are now left alone... and clutch at thin air.

I think, somehow we all know this.

And we know only too well, how it can be time for an angel to come and wake us up. Sometimes it is a person who stirs us up and opens our eyes. A person who gives us what we really need to recover.

And still it often happens to us as it did to Elijah: one time of smiling, touching, comforting, encouraging is not enough...

We need the angel again. And again.

And believe me: there are angels who come once, and twice – some as often as we need them... for weeks and months to feed us with their bread!

(put down bread on the altar)

Hymn 620 chorus only

Reading 2

Ruth 2: 14-16

At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.' So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.'

Meditation 2

I bring the bread Ruth baked when she returned home to her mother-in-law after a successful day of harvesting...

Ruth, the stranger in Bethlehem, young, beautiful and strong, decided to make the most of the time of harvesting. She went out and made use of the ancient right of the poor to glean wheat. After the field workers of the landowners had done their part of the harvest the poor of the population were allowed to come after them and collect what was still left on the fields.

This was a rule in the Israel of the judges to make sure that even the poorest of the poor were given a chance to gather some food.

It did not always prevent them from starving and eventually dying of hunger, but it did save some. And it certainly helped Ruth and Naomi.

Coincidentally Ruth landed on Boaz' fields. Boaz turned out to be not only generous, but also a distant relative who could help the two women. He fell in love with Ruth and soon after they'd first met, married her...

If ancient Israel had an official “immigration policy” in the time of the judges, undoubtedly Moabites would have been listed as “undesirable elements”. Moabites were banned from public and religious life. And there is no doubt that the biblical narrator clearly pictures Ruth as an immigrant entering the Israelites “promised land”. It saved her that Boaz, the rich landowner, did assist the foreigner, that he did not worry what others would think if he gave his special favour to the unknown and foreign young woman...

The story of Ruth and Naomi is about two women who saw each other through a lot, two women who walked each other through the good times and the bad: marriage, the death of husbands and children, relocations to strange lands, poverty, courtship, remarriage and birth.

And unlike many stories of shared good and bad, the good fortune that one woman experienced did not become the misfortune of the other.

Ruth’s marriage to the rich landowner Boaz did not signal the end of her friendship with the woman she had clung to in times of pain, danger and poverty. Ruth remembered the promise she’d made to the older woman when there was no one but her and Naomi somewhere on a lonely road... The blessing of one of them always became the blessing of the other, too.

Each woman found in the other’s loyalty and companionship the future they’d thought they’d lost!

Ruth’s bread nurtured Naomi’s hope for a future and brought happiness to both of them and the people they eventually lived with.

Who does our bread feed, nurture and encourage?

(put down bread on the altar)

Hymn 620 chorus only

Reading 3

Mark 5: 38-43

When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Meditation 3

I bring you the bread of an overjoyed mother with which she fed her daughter after Jesus had restored her to life...

Jesus and the disciples take the boat to the other side of the lake. Crowds have already gathered to greet and meet him.

And in the middle of it all this man Jairus, a religious leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus. He looks him in the face, falls down on his knees and says: My daughter is dying, can’t you come and touch her, heal her, restore her?

An unusual plea of an upper class man to approach a wandering preacher and healer...

But no surprise is reported from Jesus’ side.

Jesus is willing to come with Jairus. And while they are already walking towards that part of the town where Jairus lives with his family, the story with the woman happens who touches Jesus' clothes and gets healed.

Moments... lost? How many minutes did it take her to touch and talk and be blessed?
Minutes in which the girl died?

While they still talk, some people from Jairus' house walk towards them with the terrible news that the young girl had already passed away.

Too late. It is no good bothering Jesus any longer.

Jairus' family's got to look this death in the eye...

But Jesus does not accept this death. He refuses to believe it.

"Do not fear", he says to Jairus. "Just believe."

Hold fast... keep going... carry on!

And to the people in the house of mourning, he says: "The child is not dead, but sleeping." Which makes them all laugh at him in disbelief.

He takes only the parents and two of his disciples and goes to where the girl lies. "Get up", he says to the girl, and she, who a moment before didn't have the energy to live, can now get up – and eat.

She is alive! She lives because Jesus had refused to accept her death, and asked the parents instead to give her something to eat.

Before my mind's eye I can see a happy mother rushing down the stairs fetching her freshly baked bread and taking it to her wonderful daughter's room. Tears in the eyes of both parents, a careful attempt to eat a bite of the delicious bread on the daughter's side, and smiles on the faces of Jesus and the two friends he had taken with him into the girl's room.

That Jesus refuses to accept the power of death is more significant about him than all the miracles together: this is what impressed people most about him, what they learned from him, and what we can learn from him... when we look at the dark sides of life world wide, just as much as when we deal with illness and limitations in our own lives. It is eating the bread of life and refusing to accept the power of death which will save us...

(put down bread on the altar)

Hymn 620 chorus only

Reading 4

Mark 10: 46-56

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Meditation 4

I bring you the bread of Bartimaeus who once was blind. After having been given back his sight he entered with Jesus into Jerusalem to be there with him when they celebrated the last supper...

Bartimaeus' chances for a happy end to his story were comparatively small. At the bottom end of the social ladder, outcast and overlooked, he is begging for his living. Blind. Stuck at the side of the road. An individual, scarred for life, hopeless, forgotten and ignored... And then this crowd around him. All excited. All these people around Jesus. The disciples, the folk from Jericho. None of them paying attention to Bartimaeus, nor expecting anything from him... Nevertheless, Bartimaeus, the human being on the losers' side of life, living from charity, having lost or never had so much of what all the others have, hasn't lost one thing: his identity... his true and deepest self! Even though blind and a beggar, he is still able to hear, to listen carefully. There is the blindness. And there is the incredible crowd... but he can – even more so – hear; he can't walk, but he can shout out loud.

Bartimaeus listens, he shouts, he knows what he wants, he hears his great chance and he hopes. And shortly after he even stands up and starts running – blind as he is – but in the right direction. Those who try to get rid of him in the story, can't do so. He is determined and doesn't allow them to reduce him to being blind! He senses the chance of his life, and wants to take it!

Bartimaeus then walks on with Jesus – not because he can now see, but in spite of the fact that he can now see. Because: the first thing he sees on his way with Jesus is the way to Jerusalem, towards suffering, pain and death.

Bartimaeus world isn't all of a sudden rosy, bright and beautiful – just because he is healed. Being able to see shows him all the dark and bright sides of human life, the overcoming as much as the suffering, healing as much as aching, living as much as dying... And the question is, whether his faith is strong enough to bear all that he can now see.

Bartimaeus' story of healing from the gospel of Mark is leading us right into the passion story. The sign that happens here is a sign of the one who will die. Believing in him does not lead to the paradise of everlasting health, or peace or joy... It leads us right into one of the favourite topics of the evangelist Mark: God's glory is revealed among us, when we focus on the suffering of Christ, when we bear the dark and the pain in our lives, when we eat the bread and drink the wine at the last supper and walk with Jesus the way of his cross.
(put down bread on the altar)

Hymn 620 chorus only

Prayer

God, you are the bread from heaven,
giving life to the world.
You fill our emptiness with your goodness.
You see our exhaustion and offer us your strength.
Come, refresh, renew and restore us.

We come to you with our hunger for justice,
and you offer us stuff for our dreams of a better world:
you nourish in us the images of bread
shared out for many,
of fish and meat filling people's pots...

You encourage us to believe that there will always be enough for all
as long as people share generously what they have.
You open our eyes to discover ways
on which to survive in the wilderness and in the confusion of daily life.
You help us to see those who go through desert times
and find it hard to cope.
Let us offer them the sustenance of faith,
and let us reach out to them with practical care.

You let us see the people in this world who starve,
the people who suffer from violence and war like in Iraq, in Syria, in the Ukraine,
and we pray for them and many others hoping for peace and love.

You let us see those who are sick,
And in the past year and at this very moment especially those
who are threatened by the terrible disease of Ebola.
We pray for them and many others
hoping for restoration and healing.

You let us see those whose lives are fragmented, broken and burdened.
And we pray that there may be many on their journey with them
who show compassion, comfort and care.
May all in need, God, feel your presence and your grace.

God, fill us today and fill the whole world with your peace,
and help us to be sharers of bread and makers of peace. Amen.

Hymn 620 whole song: One Bread, One Body