1 Kings 19: 4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

There are times throughout the gospels, when unquestionably, Jesus intended to shock. He calculated the violent impact of his words. And all through this chapter, which we have been hearing piecemeal over recent weeks, he has been involved in conversations with people who do not want to see what he is talking about.

(Think about it – there are numbers of conversations about hard topics that we humans shy away from: we don’t like talking about death for example……….and yet Jesus never shied away from talking about his. He dropped hint after hint, which the disciples and others worked hard to ignore or chose not to understand – until he had to be more brutal in order to make them face the facts. Not only did he talk about it – but he himself lived daily with the knowledge of its inevitability…..)

But back to it; the people are happy with his miracles. They are intrigued and seduced by some of his teachings, but they are still assuming that, basically, they can choose. They can decide whether or not he is religiously significant or interesting enough to last. Maybe he’s a bit of a one hit wonder who will disappear without trace when the novelty wears off?... Or maybe it will be OK as long as he takes up arms to become the sort of King they thought they were being promised.

The people are busy tacking the bits of Jesus that they like onto the Jewish system of religion they already know and are rooted in. They come and listen when it suits them and go back to their own lives when that suits them too. Let’s consider for a moment how often we do that too: we come to church on Sundays to sign the list and tick the box, or for a bit of peace and quiet or for any other worthy and even some less worthy reasons. But come Monday, we can leave all the God-stuff behind for another week and don’t have time to pray or open a Bible. I have to say that I have learned that those times when I haven’t got time to pray are the very times when I most need to pray. And prayer works.

If we look back at the past weeks of dialogue about bread, we see how the language of bread is developing into a rich and profound medium for explaining exactly what it is that Jesus is offering: first of all we had the feeding of the five thousand, where Philip’s question was, “Where are we to buy bread for all these people to eat?” and in which the crowd recognised that Jesus had performed a miracle and wanted to make him become their king.

Last week, that same crowd pursued Jesus and he told them he knew they had only come because they were hoping for more food. That was when he told them off, saying that they should be working, not for perishable food but for the food that lasts for eternity. Quote “that the Son of Man will give you…… The bread of God, he says, is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And that is the point at which he states I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE.

Then this week, we started with a verse from last week: I am the bread of life – a bit like those soap operas and serials where they recap what happened last week just to refresh our memories of what’s going on. But then we move on to the Jews starting to get all stroppy – who does he think he is anyway? We know his mother and his father, (unspoken: and they are just ordinary people like us, so what makes him think he’s so special) so what does he think he’s doing claiming that he is the bread that came down from heaven? Jesus counters this with, “I’m not claiming to GIVE you the bread – I AM the bread, given by the Father.”

In fact Jesus drops what for me is the biggest clue here. Whoever believes has eternal life. The manna that fell from heaven was not the bread of life because your ancestors ate it but still died. Those who eat this bread that came down from heaven, won’t die. (The bread that I will give is my flesh. Interesting that that little throwaway line is this week’s cliffhanger – almost as though Jesus wants the people just to absorb the thought before they have to wrestle with it. Or maybe that’s the Lectionary compilers, giving us that little gem to absorb before we have to wrestle with it next week).

It strikes me that, so often on our journeys of faith, we are pushed a little bit at a time – given a nugget of faith to get to grips with and then left a while until we are ready to take the next bit on board. And so we find it here with the Jews, and Jesus pushing them to understand, bit by bit, that they need to take him into themselves – however we or they choose to understand that phrase – in order to attain eternal life in heaven. So once they have come to terms with bread, Jesus introduces the hard concept of flesh and blood – and there we are, back with the deeply difficult concept of flesh and blood, which challenged the Jews’ whole sense of who they were as a religious people, and who Jesus was.

For Christians, Jesus is not an optional extra. Jesus is life, the only source of it. And feeding on him is our only hope. This world in which we depend on other sorts of food is not the real world – or at least is only a temporal and temporary world. The real world is fed by Jesus, created by him, redeemed by him, sustained by him.

Which is probably the point at which we leave this particular bit of hard teaching just to settle. Fortunately for us, Jesus never said: You have to understand everything I say before you can receive the bread of life. And so we gather at the Eucharistic table today and every week, praying that we might be drawn ever closer into the awesome mysteries of our God.

**Amen**