



PRINTED SERVICE FOR 25TH JULY 2021

SIGNS OF TRUTH AND AUTHORITY

Prepared by Prof. David Welbourn

Call to worship

Lord God: in your wisdom you created all that is. Help us delight in its beauty and richness.

Lord Jesus: – you lived your life as a sign pointing the way to eternal life. Help us to live so that we may be a similar sign to others.

Lord Jesus: – you taught with authority and truth. Help us to believe in that truth and carry your authority so that others too may believe.

Spirit of God: you bring God's power into our lives. Guide our thoughts, touch our actions, inspire our worship, so that all may know the fruits of the Spirit.

Hymn 153 – Break thou the bread of life

[Watch on You tube](#)

Break thou the bread of life,
O Lord, to me,
as thou didst break the loaves
beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page
I seek thee, Lord;
my spirit longs for thee,
O living Word!

Thou art the Bread of Life,
O Lord, to me,
thy holy word the truth
that saveth me;
give me to eat and live
with thee above;
teach me to love thy truth,
for thou art love.

O send thy Spirit Lord,
now unto me,
that he may touch my eyes,
and make me see;
show me the truth concealed
within thy word,
and in thy book revealed
I see thee Lord.

Mary Artemesia Lathbury and Alexander Groves

Reading

If you can, read the whole of John chapter 6, otherwise read three short passages from within the chapter: verses 26-35, 57-63 and 66-69.

Reflection

In recent weeks, the set gospel passages have taken us on a journey round Galilee with Jesus and the disciples, where in his pastoral ministry, he has done miraculous things, healed the sick in both body and mind, raised the dead, and taught the crowds about the type of relationship God wants to have with his people. From time to time he has run into conflict with the pharisees and elders, as he refused to conform to their view of God they want to impose on the people. Their view seems

to have more to do with reinforcing their power base, than it does to bringing people into a closer and more meaningful personal relationship with God.

Today, we break that journey with Mark just as he is about to tell the story of Jesus gathering a large crowd of over 5000 people whom he miraculously managed to feed so that everyone was full with plenty left over. Instead, we will have John as our guide for the next five weeks, starting with his view of that same event.

The ways Mark and John write about the life of Jesus are totally different. Mark concentrates on the practical events and how Jesus interacts with the different characters in the stories. John is not bothered about practical matters, but is deeply interested in their meaning, and how that opens our understanding about God and the deep spiritual truths onto which each story sheds light.

John doesn't ever mention miracles, but instead calls them signs. The miracle itself is irrelevant to him – he is much more interested in the spiritual truth to which the miracle points. Every one of the miracles is a sign about the nature of God as revealed to us through Jesus. So when John describes the feeding of the 5000, he links it with the way God fed the Israelites with Manna as they journeyed with Moses through the wilderness. When Jesus feeds the 5000, he is nourishing them with his teaching about God, whilst also meeting their physical hunger by feeding them with an overabundant supply of food.

When the crowds keep following him, they seem to ignore every sign he has already given, and continue demanding new signs to convince them about the authenticity of his teaching which is so different from the way every other teacher or priest is speaking to them. They appear only capable of seeing the signs they are expecting, and simply can't handle the more important things Jesus is sharing with them.

Not only does John turn all of Jesus' miracles into signposts pointing to spiritual truths, but he repeatedly draws attention to the authority with which Jesus taught. In those days it was the custom of every rabbi to draw authority for their teaching from everyone who had ever taught them. They would never depart from recounting the scripture as it had been introduced to them, by their teachers, and in turn, everyone who had gone before them. Over time, their interpretation of scripture became all about protecting the historical understanding, which conveniently happened to protect their own vested interests. No-one was encouraged to generate new understanding, but here was Jesus, always talking about God in new language, new symbols and new imagery. Always talking about the fatherly love, and emphasising the importance of serving others, and protecting the weakest and the vulnerable. When the crowds demanded to know with what authority he spoke, Jesus used the same language as God had used with Moses to claim the ultimate authority. I AM. Venerated words. Dangerous words. Claims of authority recognised as claiming equality with God.

In this passage, Jesus not only uses the feeding of a hungry crowd as a signpost to the source of spiritual nourishment, he then claims I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE. Jesus states without doubt, that he himself is the everlasting nourishment that God has provided for his people. He is God himself.

In his gospel, John describes seven signs pointing to the spiritual truth of God, and Jesus makes seven separate claims of I AM.... Seven is the perfect, complete number. Believing and following Jesus is all that is needed to have the complete set of signposts about the spiritual truth of God and bearing the perfect and unique authority of Jesus the Son of God..

This whole chapter is capped by the crowds refusing to believe in the authority Jesus claims, and refusing to follow the signs to which Jesus' miracles point. Many of them leave – not being prepared to seek to understand the difficult things Jesus is saying to them. When Jesus turns to his twelve chosen companions, and he asks them whether they too are going to abandon him and drift away, Peter makes one of the most profound declarations in the whole bible. "Why would we

leave? Where would we go? How could we possibly live without that insight and love and power and truth that we experience everyday when we walk with you?"

John invites us to follow the signs and see the spiritual truth to which they point. He invites us to see the authority with which Jesus speaks – either an outrageously narcissistic claim, or a genuine truth that he surely is God. Those claims are so powerful and clear, that however much we would like to find shades of grey, or wriggle room when they make us uncomfortable, Jesus leaves no room to doubt. Either we believe in that authority, or we don't. Peter puts it into words. "We believe and know that you are the Holy one of God." John invites us to make that claim our own.

Hymn (set to tune Richmond STF 747)

"I am the bread of life", he said.
"My body is your food:
drink from my blood to quench your thirst,
and gain eternal life".

Some in the crowd were truly fazed
at such outrageous claims.
Too harsh a pill for them to take,
their faith too weak to last.

Then Jesus faced his chosen few,
love shining in his eyes.
"Will you leave too" was all he asked:
so keen to hear their thoughts.

Peter replied for all the twelve:
"How could we choose to leave?
With you alone, we're truly blessed,
to leave would make no sense

"You've shown us all there is to know:
the wondrous love of God;
the richness of his bounteous grace;
His peace surpassing all.

"Wisdom beyond our deepest dreams;
And words to touch our soul;
Signs which reveal God's inmost ways;
A life beyond compare".

So as we read God's written word,
we pray we too may feel
that same compulsion to declare
our trust and faith in Him.

© David Welbourn 2018

Prayers

Lord God, we pray for the patience to wrestle with those aspects of your teaching which we find difficult to understand and even more difficult to accept. We pray for the openness to share our thoughts and concerns with others, and the willingness to make ourselves vulnerable when we walk with you and with others on our journey of discovery. We pray for you to guide and inspire us with the power of your Holy Spirit to persevere in our exploration, and to turn our feelings and thoughts into words that may illuminate the lives of others.

Help us to proclaim loudly and with confidence that we too know and believe that Jesus is the Holy one of God.

Amen

For further reflection

This passage is one which in recent years has inspired me more than any other, not because of the clarity with which it speaks, but because of the hidden depth and profound emotions which sit behind the build-up to Peter's declaration. Imagine being asked if you are prepared to abandon the most profound life-changing insight, the most captivating love and the deepest emotional feelings it has ever been your privilege to experience, and then try to put into words those thoughts and dreams. No words are sufficient. None of the hymns in any of our books speak to the profound build-up to Peter's declaration, and I felt compelled to try and capture the unwritten thoughts behind Peter's proclamation.

Think about a bible passage to which you are repeatedly drawn, and how you might express your thoughts in a way that you could share with others.