

# Food For Thought

John 6:1-13; 25-35

Sunday after Ascension

5<sup>th</sup> June 2011

Some of the saddest moments in our growing years are when we realise that strongly held beliefs are no longer true. Times when we have to accept that reality is different from our perception of it. Do you remember, for instance, those poignant moments when you first realised there was no Santa Claus or no Easter Bunny or no Tooth Fairy? My apologies if this comes as news to anyone. I didn't mean to burst your fantasy bubble. But you were bound to hear sooner or later. Maybe when your grandchildren told you! ☺

Are any other beliefs, I wonder, which you have fondly cherished over the years but have had to come to accept as being without foundation? Maybe it was when you discovered there weren't really aliens in the wreckage of a flying saucer at Roswell, New Mexico, back in 1947. Or, maybe you were really upset in 1953 when the Piltdown Man – the supposedly earliest remains of a human-like creature – was exposed as a hoax. Or how about the assassination of John F. Kennedy? You so longed for it to be the result of a huge conspiracy involving the CIA or the FBI or the Russians or the Cubans but finally had to accept that it was just the work of the deranged loner, Lee Harvey Oswald. Maybe, of course, you were a firm believer in the conspiracy theory that surrounded the first man on the moon, that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin didn't take that "giant leap for mankind" but that it was all fabricated in a Hollywood studio. Or, perhaps you so longed for crop circles really to be evidence of the fact that UFOs had landed and you were so disappointed when it turned out that they were just a prank. Or, maybe you staunch Liberals were so disappointed when Stephen Harper finally produced his birth certificate to show he really was born in Canada!

Now, where disappointed beliefs are concerned, what's your feeling about the Loch Ness Monster? I must confess I have been a long-time believer in Nessie. The sightings have been well documented not just in recent times but going back centuries – especially in the annals of the nearby Benedictine Abbey at Fort Augustus. Even St. Columba, the bringer of Christianity to Scotland, was reputed to have encountered the monster in 565 AD.<sup>1</sup>

However, my belief in the Loch Ness Monster has taken something of a beating in recent times. Not only have various underwater expeditions failed to uncover any prehistoric mammals in the cold depths of this loch on the Great Glen Fault but also marine biologists are now saying that, for such a creature to live, there would have to be an adequate supply of fish. Fish, in turn, need microscopic organisms called zooplankton. And zooplankton need green algae. But, they say, there is just

not just enough green algae to support the food chain that would sustain one prehistoric creature let alone a colony of them. So the bottom line is: No food, no monster. It's as simple as that.<sup>2</sup>

However, speaking on behalf of the Scottish Tourist Board, I should add that everything I have just said is a load of rubbish. Science, as we well know, is bunk. Marine biologists are just a bunch of ignoramuses. So all right-thinking people like ourselves should just summarily dismiss anything they ever say and we should encourage more and more tourists to go to Loch Ness, stay in the hotels and B&Bs, spend lots of money in local shops, and judge for themselves whether or not there is a monster in that loch. ☺

Talking about needing food to live, it's not just monsters that are in this category. Animals, reptiles, insects, plants, all living things, in fact, depend on having a plentiful food supply. And, also, as we well know, if we didn't have breakfast before we came to church this morning, food is very much a basic necessity for human beings too.

In the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand,<sup>3</sup> Jesus shows how clearly he understands this fundamental human need. The large crowds of people he attracts into the wilderness get so wrapped up in listening to his teaching that they temporarily forget their physical needs. And, suddenly, thousands realise they are hungry. And there is no ready supply of food. And there is no McDonalds or Tim Horton's.

Thankfully, though, the crisis is soon resolved. In some unknown way, Jesus works his wonders through a little boy who offers his own five loaves and two fish to feed the gathered crowds.<sup>4</sup> And the hungry people receive not just a morsel or two but such an abundance of food that, at the end of the night, there are basketfuls left over.<sup>5</sup>

The next day, though, when people come looking for Jesus, pressing him to explain the origin of the previous night's food, he will not be drawn. Rather he directs their attention to a much more important kind of food. The food of the soul. The food of the spirit. The food for which they have an unrecognised and unmet hunger.

This hunger, Jesus tells them, is one he is uniquely qualified to satisfy because of his divine origins. "I am the bread of life," he says, "Those who come to me will never be hungry. Those who believe in me will never be thirsty ... The bread that comes down from heaven is such that those who eat it will never die." Immediately, the people recognise their inner need and spontaneously reply, "Master, give us this bread always."<sup>6</sup>

Spiritual hunger is not something to which we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians will readily admit. Spiritual hunger is, we claim, a condition of the past, of biblical times. Not part of our contemporary experience. After all, we say, we have more effective ways now of treating any feelings of inner need. We have psychiatrists, drugs and a whole host of mental health services to take care of any psychological deficiencies that might afflict us.

But, though such advances have greatly improved the quality of contemporary life today, is there not still a great spiritual hunger in the hearts and minds of people today that such measures do not, and cannot, reach? In our contemporary society – so beset by stress, burnout, depression, lack of meaning and purpose – we just do not seem to have the things that make for real satisfaction, genuine enjoyment of life and a deep-down sense of being at peace with ourselves and our world. And these are things that science and medicine and psychology cannot supply.

If we are honest, we will recognise, despite all our human progress, that we share the same yearnings for spiritual nourishment as the people of biblical times. If we are honest, we will, like them, sense that there are in this astounding Man from Nazareth the only spiritual resources that can truly satisfy heart and mind. If we are honest, we will, like them, instantly recognise the reality of his words, “I am the bread of life.” And respond, “Master, give us this bread. Give us this bread always.”<sup>7</sup>

What exactly, though, is this “bread of life”, this spiritual nourishment Jesus offers to meet the needs of our hungry hearts and souls? Well, quite simply, he offers us himself. He offers us his presence. “This is my body which I give unto you,”<sup>8</sup> as the Communion service says. Jesus offers us a presence that will equip us to handle all the challenges life throws at us.

Today is Ascension Sunday. The day on which we remember, as the Apostles Creed says, that Jesus “ascended into heaven, And sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty”. Being interpreted, this is another assurance of Christ’s presence with us. His resurrection appearances, though miraculous, were very limited in scope. They only enabled him to be present in a localised way, to the disciples and his other followers at that particular time in history. But when he left them, when as the Bible says “he ascended”, this meant that he was being freed from all earthly limitations to be present in a global way to all his followers, in all times and all places. So, as Christians today, the Ascension gives us this further confirmation that Jesus is present with us wherever we are, comforting, strengthening and encouraging us in ways that help us face whatever life throws against us.

Often we need children to teach us this lesson. That there is such great power in the presence of Jesus with us in our lives. In one of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, Dr. James C. Brown tells of a little 6 year-old girl named Amanda he treated a few years back. Unfortunately, due to a congenital condition, Amanda

suffered a stroke that left part of her body paralysed. During treatment in hospital, she had to have an MRI. The imaging sequence required the patient to remain perfectly still for about five minutes which was a tall order for a 6 year-old.

About two minutes into the first sequence, the doctor and the technician noticed on the video monitor that Amanda’s mouth was moving. They even heard a muted voice over the intercom. They halted the exam and gently reminded Amanda not to talk. She smiled and promised not to talk. They repeated the sequence with the same result. Her lips were still moving. The technologist, a bit gruffly, said, “Amanda, you were talking again, and that causes blurry pictures.” Amanda’s smile remained as she replied, “I wasn’t talking. I was singing. You only said no talking. You didn’t say no singing.” “What were you singing?” someone asked. “Jesus loves me,” came back the barely perceptible reply. “I always sing ‘Jesus loves me’ when I’m scared ‘cos then it reminds me he’s there to help me and make me happy.” Everyone in the room was speechless. This little girl had accessed spiritual resources for the hard times in life that adults could only envy. For her, Jesus truly was the “bread of life”. As such, he was present within her and around her, helping her in ways that no-one else could.<sup>9</sup>

As we take the bread of communion today, let it be a reminder to us all that he who is the true “bread of life” is truly with us. His presence is within us and around us. And not just for a moment or two on a Sunday morning. But each and every day, to help meet life’s challenges, whatever they may be.

© George A. Turner  
St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church  
Peterborough, Ontario

---

<sup>1</sup> “Loch Ness Monster”, Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loch\\_Ness\\_Monster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loch_Ness_Monster), cf. Also “Columba”, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\\_Columba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Columba)

<sup>2</sup> Sandrine Ceurstemont, “What is the Loch Ness Monster?” 23 Feb 2007, FirstScience.com,

[http://www.firstscience.com/home/articles/mysteries/what-is-the-loch-ness-monster-page-1-1\\_13093.html](http://www.firstscience.com/home/articles/mysteries/what-is-the-loch-ness-monster-page-1-1_13093.html)

<sup>3</sup> John 6:1-13

<sup>4</sup> John 6:9

<sup>5</sup> John 6:12-13

<sup>6</sup> John 6:32-36 (adapted)

<sup>7</sup> John 6:34

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:24

<sup>9</sup> James C Brown, M.D. *A 5th Portion Of Chicken Soup For The Soul*, 1998 by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen.