

Prayer – to feed our souls

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church
on Sunday, 7th March 2010, by the Rev'd Viv Bridges, based on the
Bible readings: John 6: 1 – 14 and 25 - 35

In the children's talk we discussed the different ways in which we, as human beings, have to be nourished in order to live fully. We agreed that our bodies need food and water, clothing, shelter, warmth; our minds have to be nourished - at the very least, we need to learn basic knowledge and skills to live in society today (how to read and write, to count, and so on). We recognised more psychological, emotional needs. We are all very aware that if someone doesn't receive enough love, they have no self-worth and it can be impossible for that person to function properly. It's well accepted that the sort of care we receive during our first days and weeks have a huge effect on the rest of our life. And then, you and I and Christians and people of faith throughout the world recognise that there is still another, perhaps deeper need, a need for something spiritual, something that reaches out beyond ourselves, beyond our immediate surroundings.

So, for us to be FULLY alive all these different aspects of 'need' have to be satisfied, and I, of course, believe that it's God who satisfies them. Through his creation – his continuing creation, God provides all the raw material for our bodily needs. And if we were prepared to be more careful with them and to share them more fairly, there would be enough for everyone. Within this creation, God created human beings (through, I believe, the process of evolution) and he gave us reasoning minds that make us want to find out about things, to pass on what we find out, and to communicate to others what we feel. So we have an unimaginable wealth of 'knowledge' and of artistic creation with which we can 'feed our minds' if we wish to. All of this is also God's gift.

We also need to be loved. If we are fortunate, the first way this happens is when we are cared for as babies, and later on we need to know that we are loved and valued for ourselves. God is love, and so God is in all those loving human relationships that are so important to us – and he also shows his love for us through his own incarnation through Jesus Christ.

We also have spiritual needs. Not all people realise this, and so their lives are incomplete, but I doubt if you would be here today if you didn't agree with me. We say, perhaps, that we have a soul, as well as body mind and heart. I know that not all people like the idea of 'the soul', but for me it is the place in which we have an awareness of God. Somewhere within us where we experience his existence – not just as something that we have 'worked out' in our minds, but as something that just 'IS', and that moves us in ways that cannot always be explained.

You have been focussing on 'prayer' in your Lent sermons, and perhaps one way of talking about prayer is that it is whatever 'feeds our soul'. It is anything that makes us aware of God's presence with us and that feeds our relationship with him. For me, everything in life can be 'prayer'. It seems to me that our souls are fed through our bodies - when we acknowledge and give thanks that God provides all our bodily needs, and when we use our bodies to his glory. Our souls are certainly fed through

our minds, when we think about God's amazing Creation and learn how things work, or when we learn what other people have felt and expressed through works of art. Our souls are specially fed when we read and meditate on the Word of God in the Scriptures and when we read the words of others who have experienced God's presence in a very real way. Our souls are also fed through our hearts. God IS love, and so he is in every act that shows care, love and compassion, whether given or received.

It seems to me that our souls can also be fed very directly. There are times when we get lost in wonder at the beauty of God's natural creation, or in a painting, or poem, or piece of music, or at the wonders of scientific discovery, or the ecstasy of being loved and of loving. And sometimes the words of spiritual writers can strike us with quite a resounding force - not just in our minds - but they can pierce us at a level deep inside and open up something that is normally too deep for words. I know that God 'feeds' me at this deep level all the time. I may, just occasionally, have an awareness of this deep feeding, when I am silent, and am lucky enough to touch the edges of contemplation, but God's feeding usually happens in ways I am totally unaware of.

So God provides all the things we need for our bodies, our minds, our hearts, and our souls. And I believe he feeds us in a very special way through the gift of Holy Communion. There are many different views about exactly what happens in Communion - many men and women have applied their reason to try to form some rational explanation of how bread and wine could become flesh and blood. But for me, this isn't the crucial thing. I believe there are things that we cannot understand rationally, and this, of course, is what 'faith' is all about. Not that we should throw 'reason to the wind', but that we have to acknowledge that we KNOW things in our hearts and souls, not just in our minds. If 'falling in love' was a question of 'reason' the chances are we'd never do it! So, whatever 'happens' during Holy Communion, we are assured by Jesus Christ himself that, somehow, the bread and cup we receive are his body and his blood and through them he feeds us with himself. Jesus called himself, the bread of life, and assured us that those who feed on him will have eternal life - surely an eternal spiritual life, with him - here and now and in a life to come.

When we receive the bread and the cup, then, we might ponder that we are, perhaps, praying one of the greatest prayers of all. Because in it, we receive Jesus Christ himself and so our relationship with God is as close as it can be. And we might remember that our bodies are part of this relationship because we do something physical, we eat and we drink; that our minds are part of this relationship as we hear and join in the words of the liturgy; that our hearts are part of this relationship, because they should burn within us as we remember the love that God showed by pouring out his blood for us on the cross. And so our souls are very specially fed - in ways we can actually recognise, and in ways that are far beyond our comprehension but that draw us closer and closer to our Lord.

Let us give much thanks to God for his great generosity, care and love.

Amen.