

Anglican Lutheran Society Conference

26.08.2018, Durham Cathedral

Bishop Irja Askola

Sermon. John 6:56-69

“Ruisleipä”. (Show.)

This is a word every Finnish person knows, understands, even feels! But don't worry – I'm not going to start teaching you Finnish vocabulary! But I'm going to continue, in my broken ecumenical English, to struggle with Jesus's teaching with you. What does it mean when he says, “I am the living bread”?

I love his simple, concrete words. He doesn't say that he is a theological dogma. He doesn't say he represents a complicated concept of some moral statement. He says he is the bread!

This is a language with which every child, woman and man has a personal connection. We use bread daily – it's in the kitchen, in our lunch boxes, on the dinner table. We can taste it, touch it – and we are nourished by it. Jesus is the Christ who makes himself present in our living rooms, cafeterias and market places. Jesus is not just for Sundays, but for all the days from Monday to Saturday as well. Just like ordinary bread, he is part of every single day – every ordinary day.

I hear Jesus whispering to me, “Do you understand what it means when I say I am the bread? I am the bread for you and everyone – even and especially for those whom you do not know or even dislike.” And Jesus's whisper continues: “I trust you to let this bread be available to everyone, not just your own friends. Let my language, the concrete and simple, be translated into your own culture.”

If Jesus is the bread, what is it that says most strongly in your own context that Jesus Christ is in the midst of everything – in the misery and the joy, and on Monday morning as well as late on Friday evening? As we eat our ordinary daily bread – if indeed we are privileged to do so – we are at the same time invited to enjoy the bread Jesus offers to us. Eating our daily bread, we may be surprised by the invisible friend.

The taste of the heavenly bread is a promise. Actually, it is full of promises:

- forgiveness for all that is in the past;
- joy – and at least in the midst of everything there remains a tiny place for joy, because you are now and for ever in God's hand, and there are so many things we should celebrate;
- hope, because you are created by God's will and are always part of God's good plan and have a meaningful place on this planet;
- community and togetherness, because no member of the church should ever be isolated, left alone. We belong together despite our ethnicity and the borders that separate us;
- God's most beautiful words are, “You are welcome.” So we, who have this bread, are to move from whatever hostility we may feel towards hospitality. God is a God of welcome. How then can we be anything other than a people of welcome?

So no wonder the disciples – and may we too – would say, ‘Where else could we go?’

So what should happen as we enjoy this divine bread? Should we keep it exclusively for ourselves? Should we hide it in our parish halls? Should we keep it only for Sundays, even when women, men and children are hungry between Monday and Saturday?

Only the bread we share is fresh. The church cannot keep it in the deep freeze. It is to be shared daily and at every hour. We are to share its promise of forgiveness, joy, freedom from prejudice and hate.

A selfish and unwelcoming church is a sleeping church. That church is a church that communicates in concepts people cannot understand instead of talking to people in ordinary language as Jesus did. Jesus – and so also the church – is the church of our daily lives. Sunday is the celebration; but from Monday to Saturday we share the bread in our different contexts. We are invited to share the richness of the gospel with those who are dear to us, but even more with those whom we dislike or are afraid of, whether they are near or far away. This bread is to be shared, not to be kept for ourselves. To share this bread with those who have hardly anything as well as with those who have too much.

This bread is given to us; but we are called to share it.

Today we will share the divine bread at the Lord's Table. There we are nourished, forgiven, blessed. This Eucharist Bread empowers and encourages us to then share the ordinary bread as well as the promises of the Heavenly Bread each day.