

HUNGRY FOR GOD

→ Last week, I spent four days at the Kings Park Conference Centre in Northampton and for most of the time I was shut up in a room with all the Chairs of District from around the Methodist Connexion along with a few other officers of the church, in order to complete the matching of ministers to circuits for the first round of the stationing process. Twelve hours per day in the same room is rather dull, but they did let us out to eat and to sleep and I certainly wouldn't be able to say that I came away from the experience feeling hungry! We were definitely well fed during our stay – some would say too well fed!

.....A full English breakfast, followed by a substantial two course lunch, followed by an even more substantial three course evening meal washed down with as many cups of tea or coffee as you could drink was what was put before us each day. So, hungry for food we were not by the time we left. Hungry for fresh air maybe, or hungry for the opportunity to watch television, or hungry for sleep, or hungry for a bit of time to ourselves possibly, yes, but certainly not hungry for food!

.....That's in stark contrast to the Israelite people, who having journeyed for a couple of months after escaping from Egypt, started to complain that they had been better off back in Egypt. The food there had been good and plentiful and here they were stuck in the wilderness, scratching around for food to eat. But being aware of their plight, God promised to meet their needs and to send down food from heaven, which the people called manna which means "what is it?"

→ Very often when people encounter difficult circumstances in their lives, the natural tendency is to complain, when really those difficult circumstances are a great chance for any of us to thank God for the opportunity he is giving us to trust him and then for us to make our needs and our requests known to him. Just as God provided manna for the people of God in the wilderness, so he will provide us with all that we need today in the person of Jesus Christ.

.....We heard a portion of Paul's letter to the Philippians read to us just a moment ago, but a little later in that letter he wrote, "My God will supply all you need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." This is a rock solid promise that assures us that God will never leave us empty handed. Yet, the Israelites grew so ungrateful and bitter against God that they cried out, "It would have been better if the Lord had killed us there in Egypt! At least then we would have plenty to eat. But now you Moses have brought us to the desert to starve to death!"

→ Why, oh why, did the Israelites forget so quickly the power that God had shown them in delivering them from the terrible circumstances they had been in? Why had they forgotten his constant provision for them and love for them. Even though they had just been delivered from 400 years of cruel slavery, they moaned bitterly, accusing Moses of trying to starve them in the desert? Why did they, why do we, so quickly forget God's goodness, when our backs are against the wall? Why did they, why do we, choose to complain rather than thank God for all the good things he is doing in our lives?

.....In the passage we heard from Philippians, Paul shows us that it is perfectly possible to be thankful to God in the most terrible of circumstances. He writes this letter from prison, probably towards the end of his ministry and what he expresses in this letter is a deep longing, a hunger to know Christ. Even after everything that has happened to him for good or ill, he is still hungry for a deeper knowledge of Christ. Nothing is more important to him it seems.

.....And remember, this is the man, who had been completely transformed by his encounter with Jesus, had experience of performing miracles and who had a track record of living completely for God whatever the cost. You might think that he'd done it all, seen it all; been there, done that and worn the T-shirt as we might say today! Yet, he is still looking forward to a deeper knowledge of Christ. Is that how we feel? Notice that Paul doesn't say that he wants to know more about Jesus, but that he wants to know him more deeply. He wants his relationship with Jesus to become more intimate and more alive.

..... Sometimes I guess we may look at other people and recognise that they know Jesus better than we do. But I hope that doesn't make us feel as if we could never be like them, because looking at them and then longing for what they have can actually be the beginning of our hunger and our desire for more of God in our own lives. We notice the impact, the difference that their relationship with God has on their lives and if we allow that to motivate us to seek the same, then our hunger and our desire grows and that's a good thing!

→ Then as these words of Paul unfold, we recognise that he not only had a hunger to know Christ, but that knowing Jesus was something that brought absolute joy into his life – delight was the word that Phil used this afternoon. It wasn't a duty for him. He had tasted and experienced something wonderful and amazing and now he had a hunger and a thirst for more and more of God, so much so that he was actually prepared to suffer in order to experience it. He talks in this passage about being willing to lose everything for the sake of knowing Jesus more because as far as he is concerned, nothing comes close to that relationship. So, in Paul's mind, losing everything is a price worth paying, because in losing everything that the world might consider important, he actually gains a new life of power from God, for now and for all eternity.

..... For Paul, it certainly wasn't about holding on to some rituals and rules and regulations so that he was somehow on the right side of God. No! It was about his relationship with God becoming more vibrant and alive and real. That was what he hungered for! That was what brought him joy!

→ But, of course, none of this just happens. If we are physically hungry then we need to get up and make a meal to satisfy our hunger. If we are spiritually hungry we need to be similarly active and willing to do something about it in order to satisfy that hunger. Paul speaks of "pressing on!" Even though his relationship with God is already a close one, he is longing for more and I guess that for all of us, whatever stage we may be at in our journey of faith, there is always more of God for us to experience in our lives.

.....My Dad was always a great one for telling me that you don't get very far without working hard in life – and in many senses he was absolutely right. The classical musician performing on the stage at the Proms won't have got there without hours and hours of practise. The Slimmer of the Year won't have won that prize without working hard to stick at their diet. The Olympic medal winners don't achieve their success without hours and hours of commitment and training. And those who gain examination success of any kind, only do so because they study hard.

.....And although the gift of salvation and God's grace is free, our relationship with him will only grow and deepen if we work at it and are determined to "press on" as Paul was. And it's not something that we just do on Sundays or for the hour or two that we spend with our home group each fortnight. We are called to be followers of Jesus who grow in God's love and who draw closer to him and that's something that impacts upon every hour and minute of our lives.

→ Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." In the wilderness, the manna came down with the dew and our spiritual provision comes down from heaven in the person of Jesus who supplies us with everything we need everyday if we turn to him and seek it.

.....The Israelite people found the manna each morning and discovered that it was pleasant and wholesome and nourishing and that it satisfied their physical hunger. Jesus also longs to provide us with spiritual nourishment each day. Turning to him everyday because we love to be in his presence and because we long to hear from him and because we crave hearing his voice, will sustain our spiritual strength. Are you hungry enough to do that? Are you determined to experience more of God in your life or does it all sound like too much hard work? There's probably no doubt that God is longing to spend time with us and deepen our relationship more than we are, so why would we miss out on what God offers to us so freely? Why would we miss out on what we were created for?

.....So often the complaints that we make about how life is for us, could so easily be resolved if we would simply remember God's goodness to us and draw closer to him. May our hunger for Jesus, the bread of life, grow each day and continue to spur us on to know him and love him more.