

# Tuning In To God: Feeding on God - Sunday 5th November 2023

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Preacher: Ruth Edmonds

[ 0 : 00 ] So good morning everybody. For those of you that don't know me and as Matt has just said my name is Ruth and I'm the curate here so I'm like one of the ministers but not completely baked. I'm kind of still midway through baked so bear with me and it's really good to be with you here today.

For those of you that have been following along for the last few weeks this is the last week of the Tuning Into God series. It's been really interesting, it's been really personal. God speaks to lots of different people in lots of different ways and that's been quite inspiring. We've heard from a range of people about listening to God, about the assurance that God is always listening, about things that can get in the way of hearing from God and last week if you wanted a summary of the series Ian did it really well so there is there in the first five minutes of Ian's talk and then he went on to talk a bit about the times when it's not easy, the times when God's call is not clear, times when you're called onto a difficult or costly path or you won't see the fulfillment of your actions or the satisfaction of the outcome like Moses in the promised land seeing it but never getting to go. Ian also talked to us about how God calls us into a path of peace not a path of peace, not a path of war, a path where we give up the easy satisfaction of taking back what's ours of revenge to walk with God which is hard but giving up revenge and choosing the path of peace is possible just about because God is walking with us. So today we're going to kind of bring this all together, this tuning into God and talk a bit about listening to God together in church, in worship, in communion and when we sit here as a church discerning the voice of God in all that brings us together and I'm not just talking about the church that we have here because we're all part of a broader church that has gone before us for centuries, people who we will never meet but who worshipped God and kept the vision of faith alive so that we could meet it today. When we tune into God as a community it's something we do quite naturally as Matt touched on a couple of weeks ago when he was talking about reading the signs of the times. So he was talking about this time when we were discerning our calling as a church to help rebuild community after COVID, to become an open church where it was easier for new people to form deep relationships and with the desire to tackle loneliness in the local community and how when we were thinking about that as a church lots of people came forward with lots of different ideas all at the same time. So we've seen it happen but how do we do it? How do we listen to God together? And I think what happens on a Sunday is important. It is important when we come here and we gather together because I think it is really true when Jesus says when two of you or more are gathered then I am there. And I think God speaks to us all in different ways when we're gathered together.

For some people God speaks most profoundly when we pray in small groups. Some people find words in the talks helpful and I often find they say completely different things to different people. Someone will come say I thought that bit was really great and I think did I say that? I'm not sure I did but God is speaking through that and then sometimes when we walk with each other in Christ sometimes God also speaks profoundly through the music and we're very lucky here to have a very talented band and I think music can sometimes make us feel more open when we're singing or just letting the music wash over us.

Sometimes that can just create enough space that we can let go of control for long enough to hear God. And for me I find God works through the physicality of it all. Praying for me has always been a physical thing. I read about these holy people who sit on their little stools for like hours on end and I cannot imagine being one of them. I find God in the walking and the pace of the walking, in swimming in cold legs, in visceral gut responses, in senses of warmth through lightness of leaves

and the softness of being held in prayer and the harshness of wind on my face, in the cold of the dawn and the warmth of the candlelight. And sometimes these physical feelings for me at least speak more than words could ever.

[ 4 : 44 ] They reach towards eternal truths that I will never be able to express. And these physical feelings can feel like they're pulling me in a direction, assuring me in a direction or perhaps sometimes just offering the smallest picture of heaven. A bit like when you go and visit a house and someone's cooking biscuits and it feels like home. That feeling that you get sometimes from something physical where you think, oh this reminds me of something. That feels to me like a little window into heaven.

Maybe pulling you into a memory of what that was like. And physically, through the physicality of it, through the sense of things, God has offered us rituals through which God speaks to the church through the ages. Now these are sometimes called sacraments which is a big kind of holy word and it's not always helpful. And as Christians of course we all disagree about what most of the sacraments are.

So some people would say there are seven different sacraments. And here in this church, the Church of England, we only really recognise two. Communion and baptism. And today I'm just going to talk a bit about communion because communion has been very important to me. So before I came to this church, which is perfect and wonderful in many ways, I've always worshipped at churches where you have communion every week. And I'm being fed in so many ways that I didn't imagine here. So I'm not missing out. This is exactly the right place for me right now. But communion has always been very important to me. And sometimes it's fed me in ways I can't explain. And I think there are lots of ways of thinking about communion. But for me, I always find the passage from John 6 useful. It follows straight on from this section in the feeding of the 5,000. So it's in this bit where Jesus is essentially talking about feeding people. So we start with the feeding of the 5,000. And then Jesus talks about being the bread of life. And it's kind of part of this big discussion. Now, I would show you the whole passage, but we're not going to do that today because it's really, really long. But it is on YouTube. So watch all of John 6 on Lumo is brilliant. So we're going to watch a passage from that today.

Thank you. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, Rabbi, when did you get here? Jesus answered, Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.

Then they asked him, What must we do to do the works God requires? Jesus answered, The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent.

[ 8 : 18 ] So they asked him, What sign then will you give, that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat.

Jesus said to them, Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Sir, they said, always give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

But, as I told you, you have seen me, and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

[ 9 : 32 ] For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

At this, the Jews there began to grumble about him, because he said, I am the bread that came down from heaven. They said, Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?

How can he now say, I came down from heaven? Stop grumbling among yourselves, Jesus answered.

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, they will all be taught by God.

Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. Only he has seen the Father. Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life.

[10:43] I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

So it's one of the denser passages of scripture, but there's a lot in there, and I'd love to spend a lot of time on it.

But I think we're just going to brush over it this time, and then maybe we'll have time to do a broader discussion about it later. So most of our ancient liturgies, communion and baptism, come from John's Gospel.

John's Gospel is kind of the one where they sort of say, this is how we're going to work out being church. What does that look like in practice? The words that we say in baptism are based on Jesus's baptism in John's Gospel.

[11:49] And while there are lots of intriguing origin stories to communion, you'll see that in this ancient picture of communion, they're actually serving fish at communion as well as bread.

So there are some understandings of communion where it comes from the Last Supper and others that come from John's Gospel. And it's kind of this understanding that people were desperately seeking a sign, a sign that they could touch, a sign that they could feel.

And they think, this man's given us 5,000 loaves of bread. That's got to be good enough. And so they follow him, and he says, you're just following me because I gave out food. And then he talks about being the bread of life.

And I believe that when he says, whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them. And he goes on. And to be honest, the disciples don't really like it. So if you get to John 6, 60, they say, this is a hard teaching.

[12:54] Who will accept this? And then he basically says it again. And then after that, he says, why does this offend you? So it's obviously a difficult idea. But this idea that you can touch God in these symbols that God has given us that are there for when words aren't enough, for when the path is difficult, for when we don't have questions that are answered.

There are lots of different responses to communion. The first one the disciples give, this is a hard teaching, who will accept this, is how some people feel about it. I mean, they can even find it icky to talk about.

I mean, even if you think communion is just a symbol, and I know many of you do, symbolically drinking someone's blood and bread, which symbolizes their flesh, is intrinsically super weird, if you think about it.

And I guess being God eaters was one of the main reasons why the Romans persecuted early Christians. So obviously people at the time also thought this is a very strange thing to do. And I think we can spend a lot of time worrying about what's happening in communion, but I don't think we need to know the answer.

Jesus doesn't ask us to accept it. Jesus asks us to do it, to eat bread, to feed us physically however that works, to drink Christ's blood knowing it was there to set us free, and to let go like we do when we listen to the music in this church, to let go enough to hear God when we're doing it.

[14:18] And whatever is going on in communion, and we all do have our personal views, for me it's more than a symbol. The spirit is there in the mix, in the physicality of it somehow.

For me it's one of the more reliable windows into heaven, a place where you can see the world as it currently is. And on the other hand you can also see the world as God is longing for it to be, right next to each other.

A bit like this tree where you've got one half where you think it's not quite as it should be, and this other vision of heaven. This eating the bread is somehow an outward sign of an inward grace.

And why do I think that? Well mostly I think that because that's been the way I've experienced God. For a lot of my life my parents took me to churches where not much was going on. Where the vicars tuned in and out of faith and muddled through and sometimes they had a bit of a crisis. Where it was never really inspiring at all. I don't think I ever remember getting anything from a sermon at my local church so I'm amazed that any of you do.

[15:29] But I went every week and my faith did grow a bit like looking through this window. It wasn't words that fed it. It wasn't the lacklustre choir. It was somehow and I can't really explain how the bread and the wine which touched me which led me towards God.

Somehow the very act of coming to the table and eating brought me closer to a God who asked to be remembered in feeding people. Being at the table brought me close to God who I could almost sense was there.

The host welcoming people into heaven. And somehow in spite of the fact my school was very anti-religious I didn't have much going on at church it's not like there were lots of young people there were like 12 old ladies.

Somehow just going and taking communion every week was a bit like these people having a snack on their hike. It was just enough spiritual sustenance to grow to own Christianity as an important part of my identity.

It was as much food as I needed for the journey. Somehow it did it. It took me to God. And I'm not alone in feeling like this. I know that communion isn't the way that everyone experiences God but throughout history people have died and given their lives to receive communion.

[16:47] And whatever you may think about them all the centuries where we have persecuted Roman Catholics in Britain there were still hundreds of priests living in little holes like this hiding and giving people communion living in a way that was cramped without daylight because somehow it was so important to give people communion that they risked their lives for that and many of them burned alive just to do that and whatever you think about that you might think it was a very silly thing to do with your life.

It was also very brave. And lots of ancient Catholic families hid these priests and risked their lives just to receive communion. It felt important worth dying for and I guess in an age where the church only spoke to people in Latin then it was probably one of the few ways you could get fed.

Whatever you may think of them whatever you may think about communion they were very brave. And I think we can learn a lot about a faith that starts and ends at the table.

A faith that starts at the table because above all in the Last Supper that's where Jesus asks us to start. It's where Jesus asks us to remember him. Remember me as the host at the dinner table.

Faith that starts at the table feeding us is a living faith. The bread of life which gives us enough spiritual food to chew on. Faith that starts at the table is like some of Matt's really meaty sermons that you go away and chew on for weeks at end and you think oh I'm still thinking about that bit.

[18:16] Or like the proverbs or the parables which you're supposed to take away and see a little bit more in and a little bit more in. It's something to go away on chewing. Something that gives you insight into who and what God is to help you walk the path of faith.

A path which as Ian said last week can be rocky and costly and difficult. Food is somehow very important. We can see these volunteers at a soup kitchen. Faith that offers food is somehow important because it reminds us that eating matters.

Because we believe in a God that cares about your bodies as well as your souls. So it does matter that we sustain ourselves physically. It matters that we stop and chew things over.

It matters that we take time to eat together like we do at Curry Club. Because the image of the table where everyone is welcome is the main image of heaven throughout the whole of the Old Testament.

Throughout all the visions of the Hebrew prophets. The image of the table where everyone is welcome is the ultimate sign of equality. Everyone eating the same food. No one being turned away.

[19:22] Of abundance. Of there being enough for everyone to eat. Of no one going hungry or worrying about food. Of inclusion. Of all being welcome there today. And I guess I think that's partly why sometimes doing communion is helpful because it kind of offers us an insight into the fact that we're all family and we all eat together.

Quite apart from that there is something intrinsically holy about eating together and sharing bread together. And this holiness has been recognised not just in Christianity but throughout history. So my family back in the day were part of the Macdonald clan in Scotland. You might have noticed that my dad's name is Bruce Macdonald Esmond's a more Scottish name you could not have I assure you.

And there was an infamous feast where the Macdonald clan and the Campbell clan were at war. But they gathered together and they ate together. And in Scotland breaking bread and sharing salt together is almost sacred.

You're not allowed to fight someone after you've shared their bread. So it's almost kind of like a sacred rule. The Campbell clan came to the Macdonald clan and they ate their bread which is supposed to be sacred and mean that there's peace.

[ 20 : 31 ] And then they did an evil thing and broke the covenant. And when the Macdonalds were safe in their beds with the Campbells in the same place because they'd broken bread together the Campbells woke up in the night and butchered most of them.

Obviously some survived and that's why I exist. But it happened hundreds of years ago and people still talk about it and tell the story because it violates that basic holiness. If we've eaten together we should be safe together.

We should be comfortable together. We are like family in important ways. Eating together is also important because Jesus did a lot of it. I mean his enemies called him a glutton and a drunkard. So he probably did eat and drink quite a lot. And people were scandalised by the people he'd choose to share bread with. Jesus also performed many miracles around food, water to wine, feeding the 5,000.

But this holiness of eating together is brought out even more when Jesus invites us to eat his flesh as real food, the bread of life, to drink his blood as wine or living water.

[ 21 : 33 ] There's so much in that that we don't have time to unpack and I'm not sure that you ever can. But there is a holiness in doing anything to feed your children. A holiness in doing as Christ does, offering your own physicality, your own body, your own safety.

A holiness in understanding that we are set free by God. An abundance in eating the body of God in a way that we can't imagine. So you can kind of see why the early church did such an interesting way.

I mean this isn't quite the picture I wanted but it's the only one that's big enough. So there are some pictures of early communion where they've got one person breaking bread and wine, another person with a pile of water and someone else with fish just in case you were going to miss out on any of the miracles so you could go around and have a bit of the feeding of the 5,000 and a bit of the Last Supper.

And I kind of like that because it's a kind of collection of the holy meals that God served. They're like there's something important here we're just not quite sure which bit. And I guess in the early church we see that these people had these huge joint meals and initially all of this was in the context of a meal which became complex for a whole range of reasons.

And so they started just having bread and wine which was less complicated because you didn't have to manage everyone and all their desires. This tiny part of the meal survived becomes kind of more holy because it's more concentrated.

[ 22 : 52 ] A more intense version of all of the ideas that were offered before. And I think when you eat in church when you take communion there is something about the whole thing that makes the church one community one body all sharing one bread.

Because when we eat next to each other and this is a church I've been involved in in the past where they all do it in a big circle so they have the communion in a big circle. But if you're eating next to each other and you know your neighbour is hungry and you're sharing the same meal that should be a source of shame for you because it is your duty to look out for them because you are sharing one bread.

If you're all eating together it's not a time for your petty grievances because we are being brought together at the table a window into heaven that abundant feast the Old Testament prophets talk about where there's no more fighting.

And if you're eating together it matters that you go and build a world where everyone feels welcome at God's table. And I agree this makes it very strange the way that some people do communion where they're like oh not you but you but you.

I mean if the whole point is an open table where everyone feels welcome that's very strange. And if we're building a world with a table big enough for everyone it needs to be a world where no children go to bed hungry.

[ 24 : 04 ] A world where no one has too much when their neighbour is struggling to eat. So taking communion just doing it not worrying about what's going on not getting freaked out by the whole idea though of course it is okay to be a bit freaked out by it.

I mean all the early disciples were. That's important. But I think I'm not suggesting that we have communion every week. That wouldn't work. This church has so much going on. What I'm saying is that there are lessons that we learn from eating together.

That God speaks through, has spoken through throughout history. And firstly I think the first one is that we're all welcome at the table of God. That means even the people you want to avoid, the people you think are not worthy of being there, the people you find difficult, the people you secretly judge.

Because God's table is broad enough that everyone is welcome. And everyone will eat together as they do in heaven. And how do we do that as a church? Well I think part of that is that we reach out as a church and make people feel welcome so that they are able to come into church.

And I think we do quite a lot of things that try and reach out as a church to make people feel this could be your home, you would be welcome here. I think Gemma does a wonderful job of that at Little Friends, as does the whole team of course.

[ 25 : 20 ] I think places like pub club where we go and talk about things, book club where we make space just to be human beings, creating space and the mental health support, the watercolour dabblers and the drop-ins.

These are all ways that we open the arms of the church so that people feel they can come and be welcome in God's home without worrying about being judged or excluded. I also think God longs for a world where everyone has enough to eat.

I don't think that it's kind of theoretical, I think it's actual reality. And that matters. The poor matters, feeding the hungry matters. It makes no sense for one of our few central rituals to be a vision of an abundant feast of heaven and not work to feed the hungry today.

And I guess in this community that's where things like food bank, like pathway, like burnt would be a friend come into their own and it's important to support them because one of the things that God longs for is a place where no one will be hungry.

I also think God longs for us to reach out and embrace and include everyone as you would if you're eating together. So that means working as a church to make sure we're always reaching out to new people, not just talking to people we knew, but being out there, meeting people, making new friends, letting people here today know that they are loved and worthy as God's children, that they are enough, that they are equal, our equals, and that we are just showing them a tiny piece of the love that God has for them today.

[ 26 : 49 ] Amen.