

The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] I just want you to know that Dan and I are wearing African robes today. These have not been in a cupboard for six months and gone mouldy. This is an African robe and Dan and I are the village elders.

So it's been a terrific weekend, this Harambe weekend. We had a great golf game on Friday and then the concert on Friday night was tremendous, apart from the last performance which lacked a little something.

The kids carnival yesterday and then the tea and the gala dance last night was brilliant and the lunch today, I hope you caught it. You could go all around the world and get food and entertainment from somewhere in the world and I really want to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who organised, contributed and arranged the Harambe.

We've had a great time. As Dan said, Harambe is Swahili for pulling together in unity. I was born and grew up in East Africa and I remember some Swahili.

Actually, my older sister and I remember enough Swahili. When we came back to Australia, my parents, when they would want to have a private conversation, not knowing that we understood them, would speak in Swahili to each other.

[1 : 24] And I told them that on my 21st birthday and I could see the gears going, you know. This really has felt like a wonderful welcome back from a sabbatical.

I feel like I have come home. Now, I'd like to speak to you today on the words of Jesus that Julie read in Matthew 4. If you'd like to open the Bibles, it's on page 3, about two-thirds of the way through the Bible.

Matthew 4, verse 4, where Jesus said, It is written in Swahili, Man shall not live by bread alone. But by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And I don't want anyone to feel excluded by this.

The word for man is not male sex. It means human beings. Male, female, men and women, boys and girls. One, everyone, does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

[2 : 37] This comes at a very important moment in Jesus' life. It's the beginning of his public ministry. If you look back in chapter 3, he begins his public ministry by coming to the Jordan, where he is baptized by John.

Verse 16, When he was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened. And he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And lo, a voice from heaven saying, so that everyone could hear, This is my beloved Son. With him I am well pleased.

Wonderful moment for Jesus. The heavens open, the Spirit descends, and God speaks audibly and says, affirming who he is.

You are my divine Son. And then in the words of Isaiah, I am pleased with you, which means you have come on a mission to save my people from their sins.

[3 : 42] And it was, of course, no great surprise for Jesus. If you read through Matthew's chapter 1 and 2, you will know, and Jesus knew, that his birth had been announced by angels.

And the angels said that he came as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament and that he would be born of a virgin, that he would save his people from the sins because he would be God with us.

Emmanuel. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was born of a virgin. He was worshipped by the magic. And when he comes to John, in the Jordan, John says, Whoa!

I shouldn't baptise you. You should baptise me. I can do the water thing. I can do the external stuff. But you, you're the one who's going to baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus knows that he's come from God to fulfil the purpose of God, to bring life and salvation. And we start chapter 4 with the word, Then.

[4 : 44] Because he knows this, Satan gets to work. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted 40 days, 40 nights. And afterward he was hungry.

Wouldn't he be? And the tempter came and said to him, If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. But Jesus answered, It is written, And shall not live by bread alone.

Now, Satan could not care less about how hungry Jesus is. Satan desperately wants to derail Jesus from his mission.

He wants to tempt him to fall into sin so that he will be disqualified from the mission. And incidentally, I just point out to you that that is Satan's purpose now.

Satan is at work in our lives. He's not so interested in our sins so much as to derail us and to deviate us from serving Christ in his mission in this world. And I want to look with you at Jesus' response in verse 4, which is very important for us.

[5 : 49] And I want to look at two contrasts which bring us, I think, closer to the heart of what Jesus is saying. And the first, which is tremendously obvious, is that there are two contrasting postures to the word of God in this temptation.

Satan's posture has been clear, hasn't it, ever since the Garden of Eden. Do you remember the first time we hear of Satan in the Bible? He comes to Eve and he casts doubt on the word of God.

Did God really say? And then he twists what God says. He says, you can't really believe every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And the moment that Eve and Adam begin to believe Satan, death begins its stranglehold on humanity. And it's no surprise, now that Jesus has come into the world from God to bring us back to God, Satan is going to get to work again and he uses his main strategy to cast doubt on the word of God.

I hope you think this is a work of great wickedness. Has not God just spoken audibly, publicly and openly saying that he is the Son and what is the first thing that Satan says? Perhaps.

[7 : 04] And how does Jesus deal with this? How does Jesus deal with the attitude, let's call the word of God into question? It's very interesting in this narrative. What he does is he places his full confidence on the written word of God.

Jesus actually receives three temptations in this narrative and every time he answers Satan by saying, it is written. Just look at the page, verse 4, he says, it is written.

Verse 7, again, it is written. Verse 10, be gone Satan, for it is written. Now why does Jesus do this? And the answer is very simple. In Jesus' mind, he equates what is written with every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

I don't know if you've ever seen that about Jesus. In Jesus' view, the written scriptures are reliable and unchangeable because they come from God and because they have been written down.

[8 : 09] Jesus says literally every word that proceeds through the mouth of God. It's as though the words start in God's heart, if I could say that reverently, and proceed to his lips and are then written down in scriptures.

scriptures. That means that if you want to know the will of God, the only certain place that you and I can turn are to the scriptures. The only way that God speaks to us is through his word.

You cannot look at nature and hear the voice of God. You cannot look inside yourself at your feelings and nudgings and special leanings and know the will of God. If there was anyone who could have done that, it would have been Jesus, but he doesn't.

He absolutely, resolutely submits himself to the word of God written. I don't know if you've ever done this, but read through one of the Gospels.

Read through Matthew's Gospel today and see that Jesus deliberately submits all his life and actions and attitudes and hopes to the word of God, the written revelation.

[9 : 15] When he comes to an issue, if God has spoken on the issue, Jesus regards it as closed. When he is in controversy with the Pharisees, he appeals ultimately to scripture.

In chapter 22 of Matthew, debating on the resurrection, Jesus says to the Pharisees, have you not read what God is saying to you, present tense, is saying now to you, and then he quotes a verse from Exodus 3 that was written 2,000 years before.

That's one of the reasons why we do what we do here on Sunday. You may be new at St. John's, and if you are, welcome to St. John's.

It's a lovely thing to come back after six months and see different faces. A couple of weeks ago, somebody called our place and asked us to bring some food to the Harambe to welcome back the minister.

I told him he could make his own food.

[10:27] But if you are new with us, there are things that we do that are quite odd in this church. Let me give you an example. I mean, we have got some very talented musicians here, haven't we?

And why don't we just, why don't we have them give the eye-popping, foot-stomping, heart-thumping, ear-pleasing performances rather than have them harnessed just to the hymns? And the reason is because they are serving the Word of God. Or why don't we have scintillating speakers get up in the pulpit each week, you may well ask, who will tickle our ears with the latest profound advances and insights, who will be brilliant storytellers weaving their magic over us. The reason is because in themselves these things cannot give spiritual life unless they serve the Word of God. One of the lovely experiences Bron and I had on our sabbatical was visiting other churches.

churches. We went to mostly non-Anglican churches and a few weeks ago we were in the middle of the morning service and the fellow who was leading the service made a mistake from the front.

[11:46] He said something with great flourish. He said, you see, he said, it was at the offertory time, the grace of God, they don't call it offertory, they call it tithes or something.

A very good idea. He said, you see, the grace of God is not free. And the congregation rose up as one person and said, yes it is.

He said, did I say that? I'm so sorry. It was a great moment and I don't want to encourage you to stand up unless I deviate from the Word of God of course.

And it's one of the reasons why we need each other. We need each other in this congregation because throughout history congregations and their ministers have tried to improve the Word of God by changing it.

There's a famous story of a guy from about 140 AD whose name was Marcion. He lived, he was a minister in northern Turkey and he developed a huge following by dropping out parts of the Bible.

[12:53] He didn't like the Old Testament. He didn't like the Jews and he didn't like the resurrection because he had a Greek view of the body. He didn't like the virgin birth and so he took scissors through the Bible and anything that didn't fit with his view of things, snip, out it goes.

Very convenient way of dealing with difficult things in the Word of God, don't you think? So Matthew's Gospel, that got the snip because it's a very, very Jewish Gospel. Mark, Acts.

He liked a lot of Paul but not the last letters of Paul because they speak about the judgment and it was extremely popular. They developed their own churches with their own clergy and their own rituals and the movement lasted hundreds of years.

But the problem is that if you have a mutilated Bible, you'll end up with a mutilated faith. That you see is because there are two diametrically different views of the Word of God.

Satan can't trust it. Jesus, it's the written Word of God. For Satan, the Bible stands under our judgment but for Jesus, every word proceeds from the mouth of God.

[14:08] I should finish the sermon there because that would be enough, wouldn't it? But I want to say, I want to draw out this second contrast because Jesus is not just giving us a formula, like a neat, tidy recipe, he's actually pointing us to God and you can see this in the second contrast.

The first contrast was between two postures to the Word of God. The second contrast is two different kinds of life. Verse 4, man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

See, there is a life that comes from bread. It's physical life, bread life. But Jesus says there is a different kind of life that comes from the Word of God, it's spiritual life, let's call it word life.

And here is Jesus, you see, he hasn't eaten for 40 days, he's very hungry. And the Satan tempts him and Jesus sees straight through the temptation that Satan wants him to choose bread alone. Satan says to him, let's assume just for a moment for the sake of argument that you are the Son of God, why are you starving then? You have got to take better care of yourself, man.

[15:30] There is much to do. If you are the Son of God then you've got the power of the Son of God. You need to believe in yourself, you need to be all that you dream you can be, turn these

stones into bread, just do it.

I'm trying to get a number of slogans in there, I hope you notice that. You see, it's never a question of Jesus' power but how he will use it. Has he come into the world to live the bread life?

Or has he come into the world for an entirely different purpose? Is he going to live a life serving his own needs? Has he come to have a happy, well-adjusted, well-fed existence?

Or has he come to die on the cross to save us from our sins? If he's going to bring us to God, it is not going to happen if he follows the way of the Superman or the Greek gods.

But he hasn't come to fulfil his own personal needs. Has not come because God meets us. He's come out of the freedom of his own choice.

[16:39] And Satan wants to overturn that. He wants to get Jesus to think about the bread life and the bread life alone. And I want us to see this morning how devious and how overwhelming a temptation this is for us.

I think it's easy if you're familiar with this passage to say, yes, I see that, I see that. But it's not. See, there's nothing wrong with the bread life. We all need food and water and shelter.

water. The problem is that the bread life begins to crowd out the word life. And it's not a matter of priorities. You know, I need a little bit of bread life, I need a little bit of word life, and everything will be in balance.

They're not equals. Bread life can keep us going for 80 to 90 to 100 years, perhaps. but word life connects us to God who is the source of life and gives us life with him now and forever.

But if we turn and live by bread alone, lose the bread life. One of the magazines that came under my door during my sabbatical was this wonderful magazine.

[17:53] It's called Good Life in Vancouver. Anyone else get this magazine? They're targeting me, are they? This magazine, the feature is luxurious transportation.

So, I eagerly opened up to the luxurious transportation and the heading is best of the best. And it's got some cars that I think Dan and I could well do with.

And it's got a double engine jet that I think I need to travel to important meetings in. And it's got a yacht here without Tiger Woods on it.

Anyway, then you come across, I'm raving here, but here is an article on wine. Did you know that it's not good enough today just to drink the right kind of wine? You have to have the right crystal to drink it in.

I can lend it to you afterwards if you'd like. my favourite article is on a golf course that was designed by a fellow who's died in Banff and the heading is Banff Springs Eternal.

[19:03] Don't you think that the very best way we could take what Jesus says and turn it on its head would be to create a culture where we become consumers, where we stand back from each other and develop a kind of cafeteria mentality to what we're going to believe, where we turn beliefs into commodities and ornaments.

I'm not talking about greed. There's something very profound I think that's happened to us and I'm not sure I fully understand this and so I'm not sure I'm going to be able to say what I mean here.

The way that we have chosen to live our lives in Vancouver, the way that we've put life together, I think affects us at the deep level of our assumptions about what it is to be a human being, who God is, what life is about.

We've trained ourselves to think as consumers. Let me give you two results of this that I see. The first one is that being consumers destroys any possibility of true community.

I come to a group not to belong, not to be a member, but to consume those elements of this group that I choose. So community becomes another accessory in my very busy life rather than a necessity out of which I grow my life.

[20:38] There are pieces in the community that make me feel uncomfortable, I'll step back and I'll be a spectator. Being a consumer enables me to pretend to myself I am a single cell amoeba cast forward in the universe with my desires and with my choices and I can define myself and my life as I wish.

I'm not bound to a people, I'm not bound to a community, I'm not bound to an institution of symbols and meaning, I can put the meaning however I like.

You find this because people introduce one another to each other without surnames, without their last names today. I read this lovely quote, let me read this to you.

Simon introduces himself to me as Simon because he is welcoming me to first name acquaintance at the outset. When he goes to a conference he writes Simon on his name badge.

The world is his friend. He has no need to stand on ceremony. Simon lives in a world with no strangers, just friends he hasn't met yet. But who is Simon? He stands in front of me with a smile but there's something unconnected about him.

[21 : 50] Mark Elliott is Andy Elliott's brother. Tina Wallace is Mike Wallace's wife and Paula Perkins is the cousin of the Perkins family I knew when I lived in Puddle Town.

Llewellyn Jones may speak with a Yorkshire accent but is evidently of Welsh stock. But Simon by introducing himself in this way he has as it were sealed himself in a vacuum.

Does he not think of himself as a member of a family, a parent, son, brother? I mentioned over the last six months that Bron and I have been going to other churches and the only Anglican churches we went to were in Australia.

one of the most surprising things in coming back to be with you last week is how much of the service is carried by you, the congregation.

Just pick up your blue thing for a moment and turn to page three. Page that begins Apostles' Creed.

[22 : 54] If you count the words on that page, the person out the front says about a quarter of them. But we together as a congregation say about three quarters of them.

If you add the hymns in, it comes to a higher proportion. If you take the sermon out, which some of you may want to do. The way in which we structured our gatherings is that you are not spectators watching what happens out here.

You enact together. You participate. Because we're not spectators. We're not consumers. We're members. We're not abstract believers.

We practice this together. The second result that I see in this consumer culture is on our identity, how we understand ourselves.

Think about this. This is right. If I'm a consumer, I understand myself primarily as a chooser. I'm a chooser.

[24 : 03] I make choices. And I can't imagine anything that is before or outside my choosing. All I've got is my desires and my choices. And I've lost the ability to ask fundamental questions about my desires and about my choices, whether they're right or wrong, whether I have the faintest idea about whether my choices are right or wrong, or whether my desires themselves ought to be transformed.

And I am living the bread alone life. And it enables me to believe the lie that I am merely what I choose. choose. But you see, the words of Jesus here say, we are not primarily choosers.

We are those who've been addressed from the outside by God through his word. We are not choosers. We are those who are called. We are called people, called by the voice of God to respond to him.

Why the word of God is so important for us. It tells us that God created us and he owned us and he made us for himself and he placed us in this world.

And even though we've disregarded his word and ignored his word and turned away from his word as if it was irrelevant, grace and in his love he sent his son to do what we could not do, to live the life that we could not live and to die the death that we deserve.

[25 : 24] Jesus came to save us from our sins. He came bringing God's forgiving love and forgiving grace and as we sang in the last hymn, in his death and resurrection, we have forgiveness.

And life. Was it not very moving in the service earlier to hear Owen's setting of Psalm 23 in memory of Barbara?

The psalm perfectly describes the word life where we come to God and he starts to walk beside us now. He leads us beside still waters.

And then as we go through the valley of the shadow of death, he walks beside us through death itself. And then through the other side of death, he describes wonderfully how we sit at table with God and we dwell in his house forever.

That's the life that comes to us from God and it comes to us through his word. What do we need? What is our part in this? The answer to that question is very simply humility.

[26 : 32] I want to finish as we turn to an Old Testament passage. This will turn back to Deuteronomy chapter 8 for a moment please. on page 162.

It's a sermon by Moses. The people of Israel have survived the desert and Moses is warning them they've got one huge test coming up.

They're going to go into the land and they're not going to have suffering and need and want but they're going to have affluence and plenty. They're going to have options and choices. They're going to be easily distracted.

And I want to read just the first three verses here. All the commandment which I command you this day you shall be careful to do. You may live and multiply and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give your fathers.

You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness that might humble you. testing you to know what was in your heart whether you would keep his commandments or not and he humbled you let you hunger and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know that he might make you know.

[27 : 54] Man does not live by bread alone. Man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. Humility is key. If God has spoken it is a terrible pride and arrogance to live by bread alone.

But to listen to God's word learn God's word to love God's word to live by God's word requires humility because by his word God gives life.

If we want to be a congregation where the life of God is present and growing we must place the word of God at the centre.

If we want our families to be the place if we want our relationships or the place of work or our pain to be the place where the life of God is we must bring the word of God there and we must live by that word facing our lives growing our lives humbling ourselves and drinking it in working it into the different places of our lives.

I've been away from six months very good for me and very good for you I can see. Deep sense of the privilege that I have of teaching God's word and seeing God's life amongst us and I want to commit myself to that again and I want to commit myself to that which will last longer than my life and yours last forever and I pray and will continue to pray that you will have the humility to hear the voice of God calling you and submit to his word so that together we might live not by bread alone by every word that proceeds from the mouth I hope to help you feel free to forgive you to get to you and take care you and it'll be I have to root