

## **Is the host gluten-free?**

I am on a gluten-free diet. It is not a choice for me, I am a Coeliac and my autoimmune system can't cope if I eat gluten containing foods. I've been gluten-free for over a decade now and my health is far better for it. My body can now absorb the proper nutrients from the food I eat and the "brain fog" was lifted.

I have been thinking theologically about what it means to me when Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Is it gluten-free? The central act of the church is the communion service and quite often I have to simply pass the bread along. Years ago I was harshly criticised for being a minister and refusing to take communion – they didn't know (and didn't ask) why I didn't eat the bread.

I have had people say to me, "a little bit won't hurt." Yes, it will. The same is true of wine for an alcoholic. And consecrating the bread does not remove the gluten from within it. It upsets some people when I don't have communion. To be honest, it can also be upsetting for me when a huge fuss is made. Or even worse, when an unpalatable alternative is offered and I need to have a huge swig from the cup to wash it down.

Over time I have come to accept that I can't eat bread and I pass the plate on. Communion – the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup – is a symbolic act and I can symbolise my participation in prayer rather than in action. But I do appreciate when gluten-free bread is used (the nice stuff) and I can fully be part of it.

I wonder if this is also a metaphor of life in the church. Our churches are made up of many ingredients and there are some that people react negatively to. But often there is no alternative – a person either swallows what is unpalatable or leaves. Too often it is the latter. It is clear that the church needs to be more diverse in presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a diverse population.

In some ways the challenge is that we can no longer break just one loaf of bread, because there is such variety. Church is no longer a single thing that can meet everyone's needs – it is a rich diversity of belief and practice.

When we begin to accept that we affirm that the Body of Christ can be gluten free – or sugar free, or salt free, or preservative free. The Bread of Life is given for the needs of the hungry and the lost, it is broken for all, whoever you are, whatever your allergy or intolerance. God is with us, whatever we eat (or cannot eat).

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