



The Bread of Life

An address for the Cosmic Mass for the 2nd Sunday in Lent
17th February 2008 ● Rev Louise

Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, "How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place; so the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!"
John 6: 4-14

Introduction

Today is the second Sunday of Lent, our time of preparation for Holy Week and Easter. It has been a significant time this week with the apology to the Stolen Generations, a time of spiritual healing and reconciliation which I imagine many of us were profoundly moved by. And in the week ahead we look forward to the final preparations before the Ordination Service on Saturday evening. These two events have been in my consciousness while preparing for today.

The passage that David read to us described the feeding of the five thousand. This reading was from yesterday's Lenten meditation. I have been aware of some words in particular - that Jesus took the loaves, *and when he had given thanks, he distributed them*. There was some bread available, but there was an expansion, an increase, that could feed many more than could be expected when thanks was expressed.

Something changes when thanks is expressed: the nature and relationship changes. When we give thanks for something, it is not just taken. It is received. Giving thanks acknowledges the giver, the source of what has been given, and recognises the relationship between giver and receiver and acknowledges what has been given.

A few verses later, also in John chapter 6, we have the reading on which today's Lenten meditation is based. Today we look to the Bread of Life.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." ... Jesus then

said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst... Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."
John 6:26b-27, 32-35a, 47-51*

Contemplating the Gospel of St John

The symbol we associate with the Gospel of St John is the eagle, and Rev Mario would often urge us to study this gospel and John's other teachings. If we do, if we immerse ourselves in it, we begin to experience its power. It can become alive in us, awakening us, stimulating our spiritual senses and our spiritual perception. It is a transformative gospel which works upon us if we allow it.

We often consider clairvoyance to be some mysterious ability that is out of our reach. And perhaps it is to some extent, but essentially clairvoyance is to have a spiritual perception, a spiritual insight. It is to see from a spiritual point of view and perceive the spiritual reality which is within everything. The Gospel of St John awakens and stimulates this ability of spiritual perception.

So when we approach a particular passage of John, how can we enter into it and allow it to open to us? We need to allow the imagery and language of this gospel to live in us. We can become conscious of the spirit which is alive in it. My understanding or word for this at the moment is abide – to have this gospel abide in us and we to abide in it so we experience this gospel in our being. We come to know it and it comes to life within us – then the teaching can become open to us.

We can enter into the words and images and allow the words and images to enter into us. The bread of life can abide in us and we can abide in the bread of life. It is a picture of a particular kind of relationship by which we can come to experience and know spiritual truth and knowledge.

I have been wondering this week if perhaps this is something of the essence of a Johannine Community – a particular kind of relationship where the teachings of John are awakened in our being through their abiding within us and between us.

The bread of life

Today we contemplate the bread; the bread of life, the living bread. "I AM the bread of life," Christ says. "He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst... If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." He will have eternal life. We've no doubt contemplated these words many times. A little while ago we contemplated the living water, to never thirst again, and today we can also contemplate another promise, that we need never hunger again.

In the meditation for today, Rev Mario tells us that one way of understanding the bread of life is in a literal way; that Christ is in everything we eat and that we can perceive him in everything we eat and drink. This means that through the bread that we eat we come into contact with the Christ. This bread then is a source of spiritual sustenance and nourishment.

In yesterday's Lenten meditation Rev Mario spoke of sustenance and being filled – that our needs, wants and hopes will be realised in full by the working of Christ within us. He also says that: *Bread...indicates the need for truth, for realisation, for inner knowledge and for sharing this with one another.*

The bread is to be shared.

Spiritual hunger

When we experience hunger we have a need in us to be filled, to feel fulfilled, satisfied, nourished and strengthened. Hunger is a strong, driving force. We can barely think of anything else when we are very hungry. From a spiritual point of view, for what do we hunger?

We live in a world which is full of things to satisfy every need, things we have to have. We are bombarded with advertising and new needs are being manufactured. These are some of the things we grapple with day to day.

We make the mistake of thinking we need something when it is that we want it – such is our world today as we can become caught in the pursuit of these many things. The pursuit becomes endless as these things will not satisfy. So while we may have material abundance we can be left with a spiritual hunger and poverty.

But it's not only material objects. We have ideas about what we need on an emotional or mental level. We decide we need this or that to feel good about ourselves, to feel worthwhile, to feel loved. It might be a job, a person, a relationship, a facelift, a house.

And yet, we remain hungry. John tells us that the bread of life, the Christ, will satisfy, that we will never be hungry again. One of the antidotes to living a life driven by insatiable need is to live a life of purpose. This is one of the things we are directed to in our contemplation of the living bread. If we are living a life that is attuned to our spiritual, Christed purpose many of our needs will be satisfied.

And we will know what it is we do truly need.

Breaking the bread

Something important that we know about this bread of life is that it is to be shared. We have that experience at our Agapés; the experience of fellowship and unity when the bread and wine are shared. The living bread is to be made available to others; it is to be given. The sustenance and nourishment is to be given. And the gospels tell us that for the bread to be given it must be broken.

*And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."
Luke 22:19-20*

The bread is to be broken and given. It is to be shared. There is strength, upliftment and power in the fellowship and communion of sharing bread and wine.

The quality of bread is different. When we think of wine and water we think of a flow, a flowing out, pouring out. Bread is different – it is substantial, it is a substance. Of itself it does not flow, but it is a substance to be given and shared. And to be given it must be broken.

Something is made available when the bread is broken. Our minds go to the image of the body of Christ on the cross at Golgotha. The body of Christ broken, changing the nature and substance of all things; making something new possible, ending the need for spiritual hunger and poverty.

This is the bread of life. A Christed substance given, which nourishes, sustains and transforms – and which we give out. We give of ourselves and sacrifice this substance to nourish and sustain others. We create this bread of life within us when we allow the bread of life to become part of us and we become part of the bread of life, as John's Gospel urges us to do.

We can become this bread of life as Christ did – a source of sustenance and nourishment. The substance of our being can be given to others. As the Gospel of Luke tells us in chapter 24:30-35, Christ was known in the breaking of the bread.

An image that has been with me this week is that as the bread is broken our hearts open. Our words and actions can carry or contain this substance of the bread of life if our hearts are open.

This week I have been thinking a great deal about our capacity to open our hearts – to hear and see the suffering of others. Often we are closed to the suffering of others – our ignorance, apathy, complacency or perhaps selfishness means we do not see or hear.

When our hearts are open we have something of spiritual substance, the bread of life, to give. Our words and our actions can carry and contain the bread of life. It can be a healing and reconciling in circumstances which appear to be hopeless.

Bringing forth the bread and wine

I want to conclude with another picture of the bread, this time with the wine. It is from Genesis 14.

Genesis 14:18 in the RSV reads: *And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High.*

This is the RSV translation. However, the King James Version reads: *And Melchizedek king of Salem **brought forth** bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.*

Melchizedek, the king of Salem – the king of peace and righteousness – “brought forth” bread and wine. It has a different sense to it from the “brought out” in the RSV translation. It carries a sense of Melchizedek creating and producing from his own being. One of the ways of translating these words, “brought forth”, is the sense of begetting, producing, creating.

We can see Melchizedek, the priest of the most high God, presenting to Abraham these gifts of bread and wine that he has created and produced within his own being - spiritual substances which are to be taken within ourselves and given out to others. They are offered.

Christ is the High Priest of the Order of Melchizedek and it is the mark of a priest to build up this spiritual substance, the bread and wine, within self, and to give of this for the nourishment and sustenance of others. So as we move towards the ordination of Peter and Marja let us be aware of them in this final week of preparation. And let us all take within us the bread of life and allow it to nourish and sustain us, and allow it be broken and shared.

So shall it be.

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