

090809 Sermon – Bread of Life

Gospel John 6:35, 41–51

In this third of five readings of the sixth chapter of John, Jesus and his disciples are still in Capernaum and it is around the time of the Passover. Jesus is preaching to the crowd. They have just seen the fish and bread miracle and Jesus is seeking to move their point of focus on from the physical bread (& fish) – setting aside the earthly to point to the divine, or cosmic, or transcendental.

Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the bread from heaven and in this he is equating himself to the manna of the exodus and placing his preaching in a passover context. Jesus as the bread of heaven, however, is one that will not perish. He has prefigured his death in using passover-exodus imagery but that would not have been obvious to the disciples at the time.

Amongst a series of seemingly unconnected statements, Jesus affirms the significance of his ministry in four key statements:

- *6:44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.*
- *6:47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.*
- *6:50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*
- *6:51c Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;*

Bread everywhere. He could have chosen fish (we have a fish Eucharist in the last chapter of John) or a variety of other things. Why does Jesus choose bread for this symbolism?

Have you ever made bread? Hands up if you have. Thank you. (If you use a bread machine, I'll see you in the office later.) If you haven't, it's simple. You need only four ingredients – plain flour, salt, yeast and water. You add the yeast to the water first and wait for it to froth up. Then add the salt and yeasty water to the flour in a bowl and mix it up. The mixture is at this point not much more than a gooey mess. You can try to mix it in the bowl with a spoon but you will get nowhere. Eventually you have to tip it out on a bench and get stuck into it with your hands. It's messy and sticky. The dough has no form or structure, it oozes through your fingers and makes an awful mess if you are not careful. (But don't let me put you off!)

Now you start the kneading process. Slowly the dough is folded and stretched and more flour or water is added slowly to it to get the balance just right. As you knead the dough it begins to change. It starts to hold together a bit better and the bits don't break off onto the floor. With the right amount of flour and water, the dough under your hands will become smooth and elastic. What was once a formless mess becomes something of substance and structure. Where it had oozed through your fingers, when it is pulled apart, it springs back into its old shape. It takes effort. You have to lay your hands on it, you have to get a bit messy but with the effort you put in and it is an effort – I can tell you 15 minutes of kneading on a warm day raises a sweat! A transformation takes place. Four unrelated ingredients are brought together to make something that is whole and substantial. Something that will stand by itself. Something that looks like it might be useful.

At this point the hard physical work is done. You now have to leave it for a couple of hours in a warm place while the yeast silently and invisibly does its work. As the yeast ferments, the dough rises, expands and starts to look like the loaf it will become. When it is finished rising you bake for about 30 minutes. I don't need to tell you, the smell of baking bread is nothing less than wonderful. After about an hour or so to cool down, sending its aromas through the house, the bread ready for its principle job – to be pulled apart to feed and nourish your family, your friends, yourself.

In a cycle, the disparate parts – the once many grains – are brought together to become what human hands have made and then used to sustain life.

Of course, Jesus' analogy relates to the culture he lived in. Bread was and still is the staple for the region and the people who come from that part of the world. If rice or maize were the staple Jesus would have used them instead – or gluten free food if they had known about coeliac disease.

Can you see, my brothers and sisters, why Jesus used bread as his analogy?

- *If you commit to making your own bread, it is a daily task, a ritual. You cannot let it go for a day or the family goes hungry*
- *Plain, disparate ingredients are brought together to make something substantial, something they cannot be by themselves.*
- *When the ingredients are brought together they have no form of their own – magic does not just happen – in fact they are in a worse state than before – a gooey mess.*
- *The formation of the dough and bread requires the work of the human hands of the baker. Something that has no substance is transformed by effort and application.*
- *Then space is given to the formed body of the dough to allow the yeast to do its work and the dough rises.*
- *And the process of baking sets the new shape of the loaf – but only temporarily.*
- *Once baking is completed, the loaf is divided and sent out to do its job of feeding, nourishing others.*

Obviously, I am drawing an analogy between the task of human making bread and the divine ritual of the Eucharist. I believe we have read this morning of Jesus preparing His own ingredients for the creation of a ritual that will serve to feed his disciples for the between times in which we now live – between revelation and great end. Are we not the plain, disparate parts that come together in the Eucharistic meal? For me, if I do not come to this meal regularly, I am not nourished, I feel scattered and of no consequence – a bit out of sorts. It commands our regular attention, weekly, monthly, or how and when one can.

In our Eucharistic ritual we affirm what Jesus said - *“I am the bread of life”*. We call it a sacrifice – because we set aside that which charms us in this world and affirm the centrality and meaning in our lives of Jesus' Passover sacrifice. In doing so, we come together to be formed – the once many grains are brought together to become one bread – the body of Christ, the bread of heaven. Coming together and forming in this way enables us to function as Church, to be the body of Christ.

We recognise there is an effort required to do this. Perhaps it's cold or the knee is playing up, or the Manchester United match is being broadcast, or the surf's up, or bed is warm – there are a thousand

distractions but we form ourselves with a bit of effort and sweat like the baker. I guess most of you will say it is worth it when you do make the effort. Nothing like a bit of Calvinist discipline to cleanse the soul? We come to see the rhythm and repetition of our ritual, like making the bread, as the rhythm of our life – life in ourselves, life as Church . It feeds, it nourishes us. When we draw together the meaning of the ritual from the threads Jesus left us in His Gospel I find the elements needed to cope. To cope with our internal community needs, to appreciate life in the Church, to live life in the world and to fend off its assaults. To live alongside those who criticise us as being odd or funny but who have not had the opportunity to see into the great depth of what it is that goes on in this place nor to understand why we do it.

Through this repetitive ritual action we make ourselves into the body of Christ, we are transformed individually and as a people. Christian life is all about transforming lives. Ray Cleary , the CEO of Anglicare said to me once when I visited him in his offices, that Anglicare doesn't give charity, it transforms lives. We are enabled to lift our sight from the mundane and trivial and to win insight into the divine, the cosmic, the transcendental. It gives us confidence to trust in this crazy notion of a living, loving God, brought to us by a first century revolutionary who was executed for being a nuisance and a criminal.

And in doing this, in being formed like dough in the baker's hands and rising and becoming bread we are heirs to Jesus four part Eucharistic promise:

- *that whoever eats this bread will live forever*
- *that we may eat it and not die*
- *that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life and*
- *that person will be raised up on the last day.*

Sir, give me this bread always!