

## Pentecost 8B, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2009

Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

### Abundantly Filled

There is a whole new phenomenon out there on the streets and airwaves. We have a whole new role model, who offers us old wisdom in a fresh setting. Some quotes: “there are few more loving things you can do for someone than feed them.” “When people leave my table, I want them to feel loved”. It’s called the “Julie experience”. Of course, it’s Julie the MasterChef! Even a TV Neanderthal like me got to see her in action, and like the rest of Australia, I liked her!

What Julie intuitively knows, is that hunger, and the act of eating, is not just about food. When we share our food with others it ultimately has a much deeper meaning than the sharing of food. It symbolises the welcome we give, the generosity we extend, love and warmth and wellbeing, acceptance of others, a place of belonging at the table.

Today in our Gospel passage we’re confronted with hunger and with the feeding of that hunger. In its challenge, it’s way out of the MasterChef’s league; it goes way beyond the nurturing that Julie wishes to share. For us, it tosses up the questions: what are we really hungry for and do we believe we can be filled?

The story is a biblical classic – in fact it’s the only miracle story that’s told in all four of the Gospels. Jesus has been teaching the crowds, out on a lonely and isolated hillside. It gets late; the people are hungry; there’s no food readily available. The disciples find one little boy who has five barley loaves and two fishes. All the disciples can see, is impossibility and scarcity. What Jesus does is give thanks. He blesses these meagre offerings, and then distributes them –somehow there’s enough to feed five thousand people, with heaps leftover. And somehow, everyone has a place at God’s table, everyone belongs; somehow all the religious ritual and purity laws around food, and all the social status issues around table fellowship, are all gone. When Christ gathers people around the bread, what matters is giving thanks for God’s bountiful provision. There’s always enough, and more.

What’s brought those crowds out into the wilderness to listen to Jesus? What’s kept them there? We need to remember what everyday life was like for the ordinary people of Jesus’ time. These followers were ordinary folk – the village peasants, not the elite and the leaders of society. They were living largely in poverty, suffering under an oppressive Roman occupation which taxed the people heavily, which was violent in its use and abuse of power, and where the God of their Hebrew faith seemed to be ever more distant as they suffered. Jesus came preaching, and showing and being a new kingdom that was about great abundance.

What we find in John’s Gospel, in quite a different way than in the other Gospels, is an earthy Jesus; a Jesus that John is at pains to open our eyes to so that we may see and truly perceive who this Jesus is. In Jesus, John shows us the God who comes to live and immerse himself amongst the ordinary people, in their struggles and the earthiness of their lives; showing them in his miracles –or signs -that God is not just involved in spiritual realities, but is passionately involved in the daily matter, the daily food, the bread and wine and flesh of their lives. His conversation is full of assertions about eternal life, quenching thirst, worshipping God in Spirit and truth,

dispelling darkness. And what they tasted with Jesus, what they saw and experienced Jesus doing, were signs of the wildly extravagant transformation that Jesus preached –the ordinary things of life transformed; and the triviality and slog of their lives also able to be transformed. So already in this Gospel, the people around Jesus have seen water changed into wine –in overflowing abundance; healings and people receiving more than they hoped for –not just well bodies but faith received; the impossible made possible in a great superfluity. In coming out after Jesus, we can ask: were they there for the thrill of the next miracle, the next sign, like the passage says? Or were they there because at some deep level, their longing for transformation was being stirred and hope was being awakened?

Notice how quickly they want to crown him as their king at the close of this scene. There's a connection they're making –this man can bring them liberation from the Romans; but they're interpreting that hope and that stirring within them as a political hope –because the misery of their lives is palpably and visibly a political misery. They're physically hungry every day, because of the Roman oppression; they're hungry for freedom, and this man can miraculously fix that. This man can feed them – surely he's the prophet and king and liberator their Scriptures have promised! It's a natural step in thinking for them to take, but it seems they can't see beyond their material needs and the physical force of the miracles; their ability to see is entirely shaped by their assumptions and what they want for themselves. There's still a way to go for them to understand what it is that Jesus is feeding within them, and they're nowhere near grasping, that with the physical substance or staple of bread, Jesus is actually feeding them, feeding their internal hunger, with himself; with his own very life. Later they will hear him name *himself* as the "bread of life". Nor can they grasp that the super-abundance of the loaves and fishes is a sign of God's overflowing generosity of self-giving love and grace, poured out, distributed, freely.

And that's how it can be for us, too –hungry for something, hungry for something more, something to fill an emptiness inside. And we, too, not making the connection that it's not, or not just, a physical something that we're longing for. Not understanding what that stirring and longing within or that feeling of emptiness might be about. We, like the crowds fed by Jesus on that hillside, may well interpret or rationalise this for ourselves in terms of the circumstances of our lives that we live with, or endure or suffer. We feel the hunger, the gap within, and we try to fill that hunger with a new house, with a good meal, with a holiday, with a new lover or some other relationship or club membership. We think that the hunger is about what our lives lack, and in this consumer driven world, we can be so easily seduced into believing that we'll be satisfied with the next new thing that plugs the gap. American pastoral theologian William Willimon reminds us "While in no way minimizing the primary reality of physical hunger for food, the Gospels imply that the phenomenon of hunger, includes, but also goes beyond, the basic need for bread. We hunger not only for bread but also for the other gifts which sustain life; love, meaning, direction, purpose, hope."

For the MasterChef program, feeding the hunger is about filling the gap with good food; for Julie the MasterChef, it's about wrapping the food with love; for Christ, it's about abundantly feeding our deepest emptiness, filling us to overflowing with his very self.

What if...what if we recognised that the gnawing dissatisfaction, or the elusive longing within, is actually our *need* for God? What if we recognised this as God calling to us, offering us the bread we need to sustain life – that is, offering us the bread that is himself, in overflowing abundance? What if we responded to God, and said “feed me”? And then, what if God, as he promises, in his abundance fills us to overflowing with himself: fills us with all the fullness of God?

How would that be for us, as individuals and as the body of Christ? If we grasped that this is what Christ offers to us in the Eucharistic feast around his table: the offer of the fullness of God in the bread we take?

What if, as we eat the bread and drink deeply of the cup, we know that this is Christ himself that we accept?