

**ADDRESS****9 August 2015****11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**


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2 Samuel 18.5-9, 14, 31-33	Death of Absalom
Psalms 130	Waiting for redemption
Ephesians 4.25-5.2	Imitators of God
John 6. 35, 41-51	The bread of life

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**The bread of life**

A few weeks ago, Peter spoke to us about his preferred type of sermon, the exegetical or expository sermon. He told us it was like landing in a forest and examining the trees one by one, using a map. This type of sermon is preferred in conservative evangelical churches, including the Anglican diocese of Sydney -- it examines a particular passage of Scripture in detail, so that we can understand its message in its textual and sociological contexts and apply it to our own lives. In most other dioceses, and most other denominations, the majority of preachers prefer the thematic sermon – exploring a passage or a text in the context of other Scripture and of daily life. To continue Peter's analogy, it is like comparing the trees in a number of forests, examining trees of the same species or similar species, seeing what they have in common and how they differ. Both types of sermon can be done well, and both types can be done badly. Both types of preacher can fail to see the wood for the trees. I am more at home with the thematic sermon. So today, like it or not, you are going to get a thematic sermon, looking briefly at the theme of the bread of life, which is a phrase used several times in today's Gospel . . .

There is one time of the day when we can always find our ginger cat, and that's dinner time. That's the time he comes looking for us. He demands his food. In the same way, the crowds who kept following Jesus along the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee wanted to be healed, and they wanted to be fed. They knew the ancient story of how God had fed their ancestors with manna as they advanced like a slow-moving tidal wave through the arid desert towards the promised land. They wanted that bread always, every day, just for the asking.

Instead, Jesus offered them the bread of eternal life, his own body and blood, to set them free from the limitations of earthly life, to realise their destiny as beings made in the image of God. Just as Jesus lived his earthly life on two levels, the divine and the human; so do we – we have a carnal nature and a spiritual nature. But most people take more care of their bodies than they do of their souls, that's what makes people like us different from the majority. Sunday by Sunday we come both to celebrate the bread of life and to share the bread of life in holy communion with each other and with God.

Sometimes, as I visit the nursing homes in the parish to lead a service of extended communion, I wonder whether it is all a waste of time. Are the residents waiting for God or are they simply waiting for death? Then, as I offer the bread and wine, one or two of them will look into my face and take my hand and smile and whisper, 'thank you', and I am ashamed of my own lack of faith. I have brought the bread of life, and they and I and all those who believe will be raised to eternal life with God.

According to the lectionary, this is the year of Mark, and most of the gospel readings have come from the Gospel of Mark. Yet for five weeks, in July and August, we interrupt Mark's story of the life of Jesus to read through the powerful 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to John, which tells of a decisive few days of Jesus' ministry, including some of his most significant miracles. Today's reading is the third of the five. These few days ended, we are told, with many of his disciples turning back from following him. They had discovered that the bread of life is a conditional gift..

Today's gospel is about the identity of Jesus, and it is also about the sacrament we are about to share. Some evangelical scholars also see the Scriptures as the bread of life, the Word of God, which teaches and nurtures believers. The bread of life comes in at least three forms.

In the Jewish Scriptures, we are told that God's name is I AM -- God is the source of all being, the only uncreated and unbegotten; in this passage Jesus applies the divine name to himself. This is the first of the seven times in which the Gospel of John records Jesus as using God's I AM name for himself – seven different ways of describing his identity as God and his relationship with us. Each analogy contributes to our understanding of Jesus and his mission: *I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the vine . . .*

On one level, most Christians understand that, in these I AM declarations, and others like them recorded in the gospels, Jesus is saying that he is divine, that he, like his father, is an expression of the Godhead. Despite that, there have always been some who cannot take Jesus at his word and accept the reality of the Son as God, as well as the Father as God, and the Spirit as God. One God in three persons.

At another level, the level of the sacrament, there is much more disagreement. What on earth are we doing when we receive a piece of bread as 'the body of Christ' and a sip of wine, or grape juice, or, in some denominations, a sip of water, as 'the blood of Christ'?

In the second century, some Jews are recorded as condemning the people of the Way as cannibals – they reported to the Roman authorities that, on their own admission, Christians were eating human flesh and drinking human blood. These people had no concept of a sacrament, of

the bread and the wine being the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, as the Anglican catechism puts it. Other faiths do not have sacraments, and even some Christian denominations speak of the holy communion and baptism, not as sacraments, but simply as ordinances, church practices which were ordained or commanded by Jesus himself.

In the centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection, Christian teachers promoted different ways of explaining the link between bread and wine and the body and blood of Jesus – so theologians have taught at least four different understandings of the sacrament. They are listed in *Connections*.

One is **transubstantiation** – as the priest blesses the bread and the wine they become, in substance, Jesus' body and blood. They still look like bread and wine but they have actually been transformed into something far greater. This is official Roman Catholic doctrine, as redefined by the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

The second view is **consubstantiation** – as the priest blesses the bread and the wine they take on a sacramental union with the body and blood of Jesus. They are both bread and body, both wine and blood. This was the view taught by Martin Luther, and is still official Lutheran doctrine, although not all Lutheran churches continue to uphold it.

The third view rejects both transubstantiation and consubstantiation as magic, as voodoo, as idolatry, and says that the bread and wine are nothing more than symbols of Jesus' body and blood. This view is known as **memorialism**; holy communion is not actually a sacrament, it is simply a memorial of the Last Supper. This is the extreme evangelical view, but, like the other two views, has little support in Scripture.

The fourth view is known as the **real presence**. In some way, which we can neither fully understand nor adequately express, the bread and wine do more than represent the body and blood of Jesus, they have something of the power of Jesus' body and blood, this is the very nature of a sacrament. What the Greeks call a *mysterion*, a mystery. John Calvin taught this view during the Reformation, and the majority of Anglican theologians say that it reflects the first century understanding of the sacrament, as taught by St Paul: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?* (1 Cor. 10:16)

Let's look at official Anglican teaching. The 39 Articles of Religion, as confirmed in 1562, after the Restoration, are printed in the prayer book for our edification. I wonder how many of us have read them. So let's go to Page 482 of the prayer book, article 28. We might read it together:

*The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but rather is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death:*

*insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.*

Almost a direct quote from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The article goes on to reject the doctrine of transubstantiation:

*Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.*

*The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.*

It is not the priest who turns the sacramental bread into the bread of life – it is our faith. The article goes on to condemn Catholic ceremonies which reverence the bread of the Sacrament itself, as being a form of idolatry:

*The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped.*

But wait, there is more, the next article tells us that, unless we eat and drink the elements in a worthy manner, as the old Prayer Book expresses it, we eat and drink to our own damnation:

Article 29:

*The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth (as Saint Augustine saith) the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing.*

The language may seem extreme, but it is a warning against coming forward to take the sacrament without thinking what we are doing, without marvelling that the God who created us and created all things was willing to suffer and die to redeem us, in the person of his Son.

For centuries, the holy communion has been the central act of worship for the majority of Christians, even though they have understood the mystery in different ways. As we share the bread of life and the cup of salvation we are united in spirit with generations of Christians who have done the same. But there is a danger in celebrating the holy communion at every service -- it can become so routine that both priest and people can forget its deep significance. The minister can just rattle through the liturgy, and the people can take its wonderful story of salvation for granted. This is one reason why some Christian groups celebrate the communion less often – perhaps only once a month or even once a quarter. Then it becomes a special celebration, not just a weekly or twice-weekly or even a daily routine.

I was reminded of this recently at one of our nursing homes. One of the ladies who came to the service was visiting her mother. When I offered her the bread and the wine, she murmured, *Thank you, but no! I have already had the sacrament today.* Until 1983, Roman Catholic canon law did not allow people to take Communion more than once in any one day, unless the second service was a funeral, a marriage or an ordination. The law was designed to ensure that people understood that the Holy Communion was something very special, and should not be taken lightly.

For many years, there was a sign on the back wall of a bakery in Redfern, facing the train line. *What you eat today, walks and talks tomorrow.* The slogan stayed there even after the bakery was fined after health inspectors found traces of rats in the kitchen. Food for thought indeed!

But have you ever considered that the bread and the wine of communion become part of our own flesh and blood, and that the spiritual reality of the sacrament, however we understand it, becomes part of our understanding of the being of Jesus, and his relation to God and to us? Jesus himself is the bread of life, the One who nourishes both the body and the soul.

When I take the elements to those who are unable to come to church, they are in nursing homes or ill at home, I am doing in a particular way what we are all called to do -- to take the bread of life to others, by our direct witness as well as by our way of living and loving. For, as the self-sacrifice of Jesus teaches us, the bread of life is given to us, not just to consume, but to share. #