

Ordinary Sunday 20 - 19th August 2018

Readings: John 6: 51-58 (“I am the living bread”)

Reflection:

I’ve been a part of this parish of ChCh-St. Luke’s for about five months now. I’ve shared food (and wine!) at vestry, soup Sundays and a number of other occasions and I think it would be fair to say that parishioners here appear to enjoy their food (and of course, I include myself). Eating together is one of the important rituals common to all cultures. I heard this week, of an English-as-a-second-language class celebratory gathering, hosted by a local parish. Many ethnicities were represented, and each brought their own special food dishes to share. Sharing food together, both encourages and conveys acceptance of one another – acceptance of our human commonality and also our diversity. This is what so horrified the Pharisees and others in Jesus’ time – Jesus ate with those who were different - sinners and outcasts. He accepted the unacceptable.

For Christians, the most significant opportunity for table fellowship is Christ’s sacramental gift of Holy Communion. Last Friday, clergy and elected lay representatives of our diocese gathered at Christ’s table with Archbishop David and Bishop Ellie, to lay the foundation for our Electoral College. In the midst of diversity, we were united and nourished by Christ, the living bread.

It is easy for us to take this sacred gift for granted. It is humbling to bring to mind the experiences of those *less* fortunate – war time soldiers sharing dried crusts and tin mugs in the trenches; persecuted Christians gathering secretly to break bread together in house churches. How very precious those intentional holy moments must be. Doreen, a Roman Catholic American woman on missionary service in Venezuela some years ago, expressed *her* experience this way:

“Before this experience, I went to Sunday Communion and felt content. Now, as a missionary, I go to daily Communion and know it is not enough.”

I remember my own delight in receiving *weekly* communion when I first joined an Anglican parish many years ago, having been accustomed only to monthly communion at a Union church prior to that.

I also acknowledge my continuing hunger for this living bread, and over time, an increasing depth of understanding around what it means for me and for us as faith community.

So, let us recall what this collective meal of the church – the sacramental gift of living bread – is all about. Our NZPBⁱ has some helpful comments:

“Christ has inaugurated for us a sacred meal, and summoned us to have communion with him. We give thanks to the Father, remember Christ, call upon the Holy Spirit, unite ourselves with all the faithful, and share God’s food and hospitality. Jesus said that the children were to come to him. Children, too, have an important part to play in the eucharistic community.

‘In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it.’

The Eucharist is central to Christian spiritual life. For us, Christ is the shepherd who leads us, the prophet who announces God’s word to us, and the priest who celebrates God’s presence with us.

Sunday, the Lord’s day, is the resurrection festival, the special day for the Eucharist. As we take part, as we break the bread and share the cup, our forgiveness is renewed and we are cleansed. As we worship, our hope and conviction that life is stronger than death and that love is the key to life is reinforced. This is food for the baptised; it is food we need week by week and year by year. It is a meal to which we need to come with open and honest hearts.

In the Eucharist we put our belief about God, about our life together and about ourselves into words and actions. We come to touch the hem of Christ’s garment.

Christ is the bread of life.”

Or as our reading from John’s gospel states: *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”* (John 6:51a)

Living bread that keeps us in eternity, may not have been a new theme for at least some of the first hearers of John's gospel – the early Christian Johannine community. An apocryphal Old Testament text states:

“The God-fearing Jew eats blessed bread of life and drinks blessed drink of immortality and is anointed with the blessed oil of imperishability.” (Joseph and Aseneth)

What power there is, in story and symbol! And didn't Jesus know and use this so well! “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”.

The words from today's reading are set within a gospel which emphasises the importance of belief to the early Christian Johannine community. As we've heard over recent weeks, the chapter begins with an account of the physical feeding of the five thousand, (with barley loaves and fishes) and then goes on to describe the disciples' stormy boat crossing to Capernaum – first, the multitudes are fed and satisfied in the presence of Jesus; and then, in the boat crossing, the disciples experience the terror and chaos of separation from Jesus.

Moving on through the chapter (which is strongly referenced to Moses and the provision of manna in the wilderness), the crowd of followers continue to seek Jesus, (their new Moses) but struggle with his words and claims –how can Jesus be the bread that came down from heaven? And later in the chapter: How can they eat his flesh and drink his blood? “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” they ask. Many turn away.

Their understanding of Jesus' words was obscured as they held onto traditional teachings and grappled with literal interpretations.

But Jesus said: “It is the spirit that gives life...the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” When Jesus speaks of eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood, he is speaking of life in him, discipleship, fullness of life. As commentator Kim Cain states: Discipleship *is* a ‘body and blood’ affair. It is physical (body) as it is spiritual (blood). Discipleship involves all the parts of us: it's a whole of life affair. And we have a physical, earth-bound, geographic, heart-pumping, and flesh-located faith, nourished by Christ, the living bread.

Living bread.....there's nothing quite like the smell of bread baking in the oven. And there's something very special about the process of making it. It's a physical, earthy, heart-pumping experience.

When I was at home with my two pre-school daughters, we regularly made bread together. On cold winter's days, a happy chaos reigned in our kitchen, as yeast was warmed and energized with sugar, and flour measured into bowls (with liberal dustings on floor, bench-tops and apron-clad daughters). Then came the mixing and kneading – little fingers working rhythmically, faces set in total concentration...and more flour scattered and rubbed on itchy noses.

But after all this intense work, a time of stillness and waiting – sticky dough carefully contained and covered, and left to rise in a warm place.

The children loved the next phase best – ‘transformation’ - when they turned their risen dough onto the floury board and proceeded to flatten it!...and then shape it (eventually) into it's final form. Would it be mini-loaves or a knot or plaited bun? It's a miracle that the well-pummeled dough ever managed to rise again! But indeed it did, and the warm golden-baked loaves of all shapes and sizes would be duly and reverently eaten, dripping with melting butter and sticky homemade jam – overwhelming all our senses (and the kitchen floor).

And you know, thinking back, I realize that the nourishment and satisfaction gained from creating and sharing that ‘living bread’ was far greater than its nutritional value. In fact, I think it was ‘sacrament’ and my little girls and I were sacrament to one another.

Of course, living bread needs to be shared, needs to be consumed. Otherwise it becomes stale, inedible, wasted. And as we recognise this, we realise another profound truth. Not only is Christ the living bread, but so are we! Jesus said: *“If you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you are one with me, and I am one with you.”*

As one of our NZ Prayer Book liturgies begins):

**“Family of Christ,
welcome to this holy table,**

**welcome to you
for we are Christ's body,
Christ's work in the world.”ⁱⁱ**

In the Eucharistic prayer the priest prays:

Send your Holy Spirit
that we who receive Christ's body
may indeed be the body of Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

And we proclaim:

We who are many are one body for we all share the one bread.^{iv}

The bread broken is the inbreaking of the living God into our lives – and we in turn, as Christian community - are called to be living bread to others.

I wonder what that means for us as we.....

share in soup Sundays, prepare and share the St. Luke's magazine, gather for Holy Communion with rest home residents, for craft mornings or study group, or offer spirituality centre 'food' to others?

and what about workplace morning-teas, coffee with a neighbour and our family dinner table?

Let us pause for reflection.....

God of yeast and grain,
Our divine baker,
May we feed on your living bread in our hearts,
by faith, with thanksgiving;
and may we *be* living bread
submitting to your kneading,

shaped to nourish others
this coming week. Amen.

ⁱ A New Zealand Prayer Book He Karakia Mihinare O Aotearoa, Collins, 1989, p.403

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.476

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.487

^{iv} *Ibid*, p.425