

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 18B

Over the past few months, we have had some parish dinners. These are always wonderful occasions centred on the act of eating and drinking together. With these dinners, I am always reminded of how food is one of the glues of social interaction. It gives us an excuse to meet and to get to know each other better, and there is nothing better than being satisfied after a big meal. Food is powerful, and no where is this seen more than in today's Gospel.

You can have sympathy with the crowds in John's gospel. In the events leading up to today's reading Jesus has fed all 5000 of them and left them to make his way to the other side of the sea and it is here that the crowds gather again, seeking out Jesus once more.

But what is it that they are looking for? Is it Jesus the teacher, the prophet of God whose wisdom and charity they admire? Or is it the simple fact that they are hungry and want more free bread. There was a rather problematic name in nineteenth-century China for such persons who came to church because they were hungry for material food. They converted, were baptised, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their

physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But when their prospects improved and they and their families no longer needed rice they drifted away from church. Hence, missionaries called them 'Rice Christians'.

Perhaps the crowds that day could be aptly called 'Bread Christians' a sort of religion of convenience which typically thinks of the relationship with God as a kind of lobbying of 'do ut des', "I give so you will give", as ancient Roman law used to put it.

This could be seen in their question of Jesus and his response "Rabbi, when did you come here?" "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. As the church Father John Chrysostom put it, "By his words to them He was all but saying this, 'It is not the miracle of the loaves that has struck you with wonder, but the being filled.'"

That is an important observation. If there is one universal human need, it is not the desire for miracles but the need to be filled, physically, and as people of faith, we would add, spiritually. We all acknowledge and I hope advocate for meeting the physical needs of those we know of, but equally we are conscious of the fact that such

nourishment does not offer transformation of character and wholeness. Jesus is speaking of the other food entirely here.

Not the manna that came down from heaven that fed the Israelites in the days of Moses, but rather something much more meaningful, more meaningful because Jesus is in fact this “bread of life”. Moreover, in affirming this, we are not affirming an invisible, spiritual blessing, but what John’s Gospel does is reframe our notions of spiritual. In this Gospel, indeed in this faith, the spiritual is incarnational, tied to the stuff of this life, present, here, now.

For when we as the church want to get especially spiritual, we do so at a table, with eating and drinking of bread and wine, communing with the Bread of Life.

For Jesus’ claim is that he is the bread of life, the manna that has come down from heaven. How this is so, or even what it means is not given, we are left only with the mystery.

And with such mystery’s and sayings of Jesus there is the temptation to try and explain it using complicated philosophical theories such as doctrines of transubstantiation, and what the bread

and the wine ‘turn into’. It is almost like as preachers, we often try to simplify what Jesus is saying with an attitude that says “Here is what Jesus was trying to say to you if he was as skilful a communicator as I”.

This comes about I think because as modern people we believe that we have an inalienable right to comprehend everything. There is no space for mystery, and the greatest mystery, appropriately called the holy mysteries is that through faith by bread and wine, we receive God’s grace, and are fed and nourished.

As John Calvin was once asked to explain the Eucharist, he replied, “that he would rather experience it than to understand it.”

Therefore, as we live with this mystery, I encourage us not to strain so much to comprehend, but simply to receive it in faith, knowing that this bread is “The way, the Truth and the Life, and therefore let us eat and be filled. Amen