

Sunday 19th August, 2018
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

1 Kings 2:10-12,3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:11-21

John 6:51-58

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is a rather unusual thing, in the way our Lectionary is set up, to spend five Sundays in a row focusing on just a single chapter of a Gospel - and even more so when this chapter really only, on the face of it at least, has one theme. But that is exactly the case with the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, from which we again take our central reading today. Jesus, once more, is instructing the disciples and the crowd, and the theme is "The Bread of Life."

Some have likened this chapter of John to a musical composition known technically as a variation. This is a piece of music which has a central melody that is repeated throughout the piece in an altered form. The music revolves around this central theme, returning to it again and again in a slightly different form.

So it is with this chapter, where the important terms and phrases that characterize Jesus' speech following the feeding of the five thousand appear and reappear throughout the narrative - "bread of life," "bread that comes down from heaven," "manna that your ancestors ate," "the Father who sent me," "eternal life," "believe."

At times their repetition lulls the reader into thinking that one verse sounds just like another and that there is no progression in the discourse. But the moves are subtle, and shifts occur without change of setting or great fanfare, just like a beautiful piece of music moves fluently from one part to another.

In all of this we need to remember how the chapter began - with the physical feeding of the hungry people in the miracle of the loaves and fishes. This is the key to understanding the chapter and the lens through which we must read all that follows.

Those who were fed by Jesus with the physical bread become the crowd who are now following Jesus, chasing him, almost with their questions and their challenge - "show us a sign" - "feed us again". And yet the more Jesus tries to explain to them that they will never be truly satisfied with mere physical bread the more, it seems, their lack of understanding is magnified.

And in a way, it's not surprising - after all, try to hear the words of Jesus from John's gospel without your "church" ears on. "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you". Eating flesh and drinking blood? Sounds disturbingly like cannibalism doesn't it? The bare language is more than a little unsettling once we take off our rose-colored lenses of faith and theological understanding. Sure, we church folk know there is much more to those words than what they literally say, but imagine the first hearers of Jesus trying to make sense of them - is it really any wonder that they wanted to know more?

In all of this, it seems to me that the overarching message of Jesus here is that material bread, while important to the sustenance of human life, is insufficient; the loaves will not sustain these people. There is more to life than the physical realm. There is also the spiritual realm. We are both creatures of the earth and creatures of heaven. And it is the Eucharist which seems to connect the two.

As you may well know, John's Gospel does not include any reference to bread and wine at the occasion of the Last Supper - instead, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, and gives them the great commandment to love one another. In many ways, therefore, this Chapter is seen as John's foundation for our understanding of the Eucharist.

Bread and wine serve as symbols of body and blood, so that by partaking of them one shares in Jesus' spiritual body and blood, and we share in the promise that Jesus gives - the eternal bread that will last.

Bread and Wine are first and foremost products of the earth. There is a beautiful form of the prayer over the gifts at the start of the Great Thanksgiving, which goes like this: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we have this bread to set before you, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life." And prayed over the wine; "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we have this wine to set before you, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become for us the cup of salvation."

These prayers affirm the origins of the basic elements of our faith - that these ordinary things come from the earth, and are made by human hands. And yet, the Eucharistic Bread and Eucharistic Cup take those earthly elements and turn them into something spiritually nourishing. They are the means of salvation—in that they connect us to Christ.

Earthly things made heavenly - this is the reality of the bread and the wine in the Eucharist. But more than that it is the reality of Christ's promise for us; that even though we may be born of earth we share in the joys of heaven, as we partake of the heavenly meal. In Christ becoming the bread sent down from heaven, and giving of his very self to us in this communion, we take on something of his divine and heavenly nature.

Jesus invites us into a way of living and being that is at once both here, of this earth, but with our minds set on heavenly things. What Jesus offers here is a total life commitment that opposes the very foundations both of first century and twenty-first century culture.

Living, breathing, and abiding in Christ's body each hour of every day is our countercultural calling as Christians. We are to show Christ to the world through our words and actions, every day of our lives both individually and as worshipping communities. Having consumed and been fueled by Christ into full communion, we in turn offer the experience of his saving grace and boundless love to others.

It is returning, again and again, week after week, for Jesus' presence in Word and the sacrament of the Eucharist that we are conformed more and more to be like Jesus. And in those times in life when challenges arise and we are not sure we have what it takes, we return again to be sustained by Jesus' presence. And if we begin to feel unworthy of God's love, we know that we can always return to the altar, confess, and receive forgiveness. Then through Christ's presence in the sacrament, we are fed for the coming week. For Jesus gave us this bread so that we might live. So let us pray - "feed us now, bread of life"... Amen.

In the name of God. Amen