

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 17 Year B 2018

It's surely one of the hard truths of life that if we want things to be different then we have to change. If we are not happy with the direction of our lives, then it's up to us to alter the way we're heading. If things are going awry in our lives, if things don't seem quite right, if things are spinning out of control, then it's unlikely we will have much control over all the many forces and complex influences that press hard against us. Now, it's very easy to shake our fist at the world, to rattle everything that is wrong with it, to proclaim to everyone who will listen all the bad things that impact us. So much harder to humbly admit our contribution to the dis-ease and dis-order in the world around. And even harder, perhaps, to be real about the dis-ease and dis-order we cause in our own lives.

One of the great insights of the incredibly successful Alcoholics Anonymous is that the very *first* step outlined in its 'Twelve step' programme is that people have to recognise, have to take ownership and *admit*, that they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable. In other words, they need to admit *they have a problem*. As with any journey, it is always the first step that is the hardest. Surely, part of the success of Alcoholics Anonymous is the power of that first step - *recognising you have a problem*.

Just as the journey toward wholeness and healing in Alcoholics Anonymous begins by recognising a problem, by admitting a real need, so too the Christian journey begins. The Christian journey begins by recognising we have a problem. The good news is that God offers the solution! The problem is that something has gone amiss, that the life of closeness and intimacy with God is *not* what most of us live and experience. And so, it should not surprise us that time and time again - throughout all of scripture - is this coming back to the first principle: that there is a problem and we need to admit it. Without admitting we have a problem we cannot hope to progress in the life of faith. Without admitting we have a problem we cannot make our journey back to God. And we even see this dynamic at work in the gospel today. It's a familiar and indeed popular story, but a lot is going on in it. But essentially it expresses the deepest human need, our 'problem', in terms of human hunger.

We now leave behind the Gospel of Mark that we have been following for most of the year and we turn to John's Gospel. And we hear the first part of a long account that focuses on Jesus, the Bread of Life. So important is this chapter we follow it now for the next 5 weeks. So today, just the start of this important section. And the whole story urging us to admit our need, seeking to have us admit that we are hungry, that we need life-giving and saving food.

Now, in John's Gospel the details are important. And here the time and place are important. We are told Jesus *climbs the hillside* and so points us to the idea of Moses who climbs the mountain to give the law. And we remember too, that it was Moses who directed the Israelites to the manna which fed them for forty years in the wilderness. And we are told that the miraculous feeding occurs shortly before the feast of Passover. Again, where bread - made unleavened so the Israelites could escape from Egypt - is central to the story. But Passover is also the story of liberation and of freedom. John wants these layers of meaning to be read into the story we hear today. These details in the story are John's way of saying something really, really important is going on here. Its not just a picnic in a paddock. People aren't just getting a free feed....

But as the story is told to us, that *is* how many in the crowd do respond to this miraculous event. People are excited and going after Jesus because they are, as we are told, *'impressed by the signs he gave by curing the sick.'* They want more of the show, more of the drama. They relish the novelty and excitement of it all. The *tragedy* of this part of the story is that they do not see *past* the bread and fish; they do not see past the drama. They do not see past the fad and excitement. What they hunger for is more of the 'magic', as it were. They want more of the 'wow'! And so, their *misdirected* hunger is channelled toward violence, seeking to take Jesus by force. 'Misdirected hunger' really expresses so much of what has gone awry in the human condition. We go after everything else, *other than* that which will really, truly satisfy. This misdirected hunger can only begin to be remedied when we admit we won't be satisfied by snacking on junk food. The trouble so often remains, though, is that we do not how malnourished or famished we really are.

I am often staggered at how content so many Christians are in their life of faith to just nibble the edge of a crust, to settle on a diet of white bread and McDonalds. So often we fail to see the super-abundance God offers (12 baskets left over. There's always more than we hope for or imagine!!). We can somehow imagine that the banquet God has laid out is for others, not for me.

But Christians believe God *has* laid out a banquet for us! We are here because we recognise that in Christ *is* found the Bread of Life. We come to feed on him who gives of himself in word and sacrament and in the community of believers. And while all this is good and wonderful - indeed essential (and perhaps the only essential) - it is also *the minimum*. It is almost as if we come to the banquet each week and only settle for the entrée. Now, is there anything more irritating when going out to a fancy restaurant when you're starving and you want to order the soup, a large steak, chocolate cake with cream and ice-cream for dessert *and* a bottle of wine, and your dinner companion says they'll just have the salad and a glass of water - the *minimum* to be polite... Yet that is how most Christians live out their Christian life: a limp green salad and a glass of water, not realising what a wonderful feast is on offer.

So many Christians walk around not realising they are in fact critically malnourished. We do not avail ourselves of the graces of the sacraments, failing to recognise Christ truly and actually present and at work in them, coming to them perhaps reluctantly or intermittently. We do not avail ourselves of opportunities for prayer, the true well spring from which any authentic work or mission for God will come. We do not take time to know the scriptures, remaining astonishingly ignorant of our sacred texts, instead allowing them to go stale on the shelf. So often we allow ourselves to only superficially know those who sit at table with us. All these opportunities God gives us to be fed and nourished, but so often we don't even know what we're missing out on, never admitting how hungry we are. My brothers and sisters, God doesn't want us to be hungry. God is offering us everything we could want or need or even hope for. It's all there, ready for us to receive! We have to first acknowledge our hunger. But *everything* to satisfy our deepest, truest hungers can be satisfied by God's gracious abundance. Amen.