

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 17 Year B 2024

At the very heart of our lives as faithful, traditional Anglicans is the Eucharist. The Eucharist has been described as ‘the source and summit’ of the Christian life. By this we mean that the Eucharist is not only a way to receive grace, but it is Jesus himself. Jesus who – according to his own word and promise - is truly present in the lowly form of bread and wine. Jesus who is the very source of all grace, and Jesus who is the goal (the summit) of our lives. Because the Eucharist – or we may say the mass, or Holy Communion, it doesn’t really matter which – is so important, it is right and just that from time to time we offer it careful and sustained attention.

That is what we will be doing for the next several weeks. Once every three years, the readings set for each Sunday take us to John 6. We have heard the first part of this long chapter today with the well-known story of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. It was clearly a captivating and important story for the early church because all four gospels tell it. And before we get to the stories of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection, the feeding of the 5000 is the *only story shared* by all four gospels. So, a prominent, formative and important story.

Now, the gospel writer John takes this little story and projects it, if you like, onto the big screen! So amplified, however, the text of John 6 can appear somewhat dense and repetitive. And so, for the preacher, something of challenge if we want to direct our focus to the text only. Now what follows the account we hear today (and skipping over an intervening story of Jesus walking on the water) is a long section mostly known as the Bread of Life Discourse. From earliest times, the church has read this discourse – a conversation between Jesus and his interlocutors - as a reflection on the Eucharist. The church in her wisdom has recognised that John 6 is the earliest, sustained reflection on the Eucharist. And so, over the coming month or so we give the great gift and mystery of the Eucharist also some sustained attention.

Now last time we encountered this text we were still all in lock down! The sermons we were delivering then was through the lens of camera phone! But at that time Fr James and I took that opportunity to offer some reflections on the Eucharist. We took four important categories for understanding the Eucharist and looked at one each week. So, at that time we considered the Eucharist as Presence, as Sacrifice, as Memorial, and as the Prayer of the Church.

Those four addresses were compiled into a little booklet which has been available on the back table ever since. If you never picked up a copy, or you have forgotten was said three years ago, well, there should be plenty of those booklets available for you today. Now we certainly didn't manage to say everything that could be said about those topics! But understanding the Eucharist as Presence, Sacrifice, Memorial and Prayer are really foundational to how we understand the gift and mystery of the Eucharist, so I commend them to you again.

But for the coming few weeks, along with Fr Isuru, I hope to again offer four (different) reflections on the Eucharist. But again, with categories that have been helpful and sustaining for generations of Christians. The four topics we will explore together will be the Eucharist as Food for the Journey, the Eucharist as the Body of Christ, the Eucharist as Thanksgiving, and the Eucharist as the Banquet of Eternal Life.

So, a reflection now on the idea of the Eucharist as Food for the Journey. In the gospel account we have heard today, Jesus instructs the crowd to recline on the grass. Taking the barley loaves and dried fish, Jesus makes a meal that satisfies the enormous crowd. They are tired. They are hungry. They are worn out from their exertions, and Jesus gives them sustenance for the day. Out of something small and unremarkable, an abundance is brought forth. Jesus takes a poor offering from a poor boy to provide sustenance for the many.

For Saint Thomas Aquinas, the great image for the Eucharist is sustenance: food for the journey. He says, baptism defines us, making us sons and daughters of God. Confirmation strengthens and deepens this identity. Marriage and Holy Orders seal us in our life's vocation. These are sacraments offered once at key moment's one's life. But then there is the Eucharist. Christ's gift to us as food, daily food, daily bread. The Eucharist is Christ's gift to get us through the day and through each week. Surely it is only the stubborn or the stupid that would refuse such a gift!

Now, each time we pray the mass, we include the Our Father. This prayer given us by Jesus himself is of course especially appropriate at the mass. For in it we pray *give us this day, our daily bread*. Now, we can understand this petition in two ways. Yes, it is a request to God to provide us with our daily, physical, material needs. The daily bread we need to survive, to replenish our bodies. We are enfleshed beings. We are not pure spirit. Our bodies matter. We need daily 'bread' however we are to imagine this.

And the prayer is humble recognition that *we need God*. All that we have comes from him. We are dependent on him and on his goodness. I have heard it is said that it is only those who do not need God who do not believe in him. In other words, it is only those who are self-satisfied who do not believe. It is only those who are wealthy, secure, those who are surrounded by comfort and have all their material needs met, who can dispense with faith and trust in God. But it those who are hungry, who are dependent, those who know their need, who trust him. And who in humility will *accept* the sustenance he provides. So, humbly asking for daily bread *guards* an essential spiritual disposition: recognising that all the good things we have come from the Good God.

And so, as we kneel in our pews, and offer this prayer, today and at every mass, we should be confident to bring all that we are – all our needs, all our hurts and hungers, all our disappointments and brokenness – all that we are to Jesus. Is this not the point about the offering of barley loaves in the gospel today? This is the bread of the poor. Before God, we are only poor. Yet all our poverty we can bring before him, and receive of him his sustaining, life-giving Bread. He gives us bread for the journey.

Give us this day our daily bread. But we also pray this at each mass because we are not just material, physical beings. To live as if our bodies and our material needs and wants were the highest good will only leave us impoverished. *Man is not made for bread alone*, says our Lord in rebuttal to the devil's temptation. And temptation it is! The world around us is full of people who have been sold the lie that the material and physical world is all that counts. But only feel a gnawing hunger, an emptiness because of this deceit. *We are not made for bread alone.* We are made for God! And our hungers will only be satisfied when accept this truth.

There are of course many ways to nurture and strengthen our life with God. Through personal prayer, through the sharing in the life of the faithful, through reading scripture, through any number of good spiritual disciplines and practices. And all these are good and important. And we must – all of us – find a sustainable discipline that will nourish us day in and day out, week in and week out. Or we risk malnourishing our souls and starving our life with God. This is not someone else's responsibility, it is yours! There will always be reason (excuses!) not to take it seriously. But the assurance of the gospel text today should be that Jesus can take even *the very little* we offer and transform it into something remarkable.

But Jesus does not want us to offer just the little we have. He wants to heal and transform all of us! He wants us to have *abundance of life*, not just to survive. If we never ate, or ate irregularly, or only ate on special and festive occasions, how effective would we be? Not very would be the answer! So, in the spiritual life, in our life with God, we must eat and drink or we will not have the strength. But into our sustainable and lifegiving practices we want to say that the eucharist is the *privileged source* of nourishment. It is the food, the nourishment, particular to the Christian, particular to sustaining the Christian life. Why? Because it is Christ's gift of himself. The goal - the end of Christian life - is Christ. Through the Eucharist the source of all grace, gives of himself so that we might be united to him. So, avail yourselves of the grace - the sustenance he offers - frequently, devoutly, and humbly. Amen.