

**Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist**

**Eleventh Sunday after Trinity**

readings: [2 Samuel 18.5-9, 15, 31-33](#), [Ephesians 4.25-5.2](#), [John 6.35, 41-51](#)

11 August 2024

Even if you are old enough, as many of us are, it is possible you don't remember who won the Eurovision Song contest in Dublin in 1994. Brendan Graham's *Rock 'n' Roll Kids* has long been consigned to history. But you might remember the interlude in the middle, the revealing of the phenomenon that is now known as *Riverdance*. What was meant just to keep people going between the real action rather took over the whole show.

As we all know, Mark's gospel is shorter and more direct than Matthew and Luke. And so, during Year B when we focus on Mark we get some tasty chunks of John as well. Today is the third of five consecutive Sundays in which we work our way through John chapter 6.

So why is this chapter given such prominence? Like the other evangelists, John presents us with a story of Jesus feeding a great crowd with a meagre amount of food. The excited crowd had followed Jesus from one side of the Sea of Galilee been fed after Jesus took a lad's picnic lunch of cheap bread and fish, and then gone in search of Jesus after he mysteriously crossed back to the other side. There are three key things in John's narrative. First, he describes the feeding of the crowd and Jesus' walking on the water not as miracles but as signs. His focus is on what the signs tell us about Jesus. Second, he notes that it is around the time of the Passover when Jews celebrate their liberation from slavery in Egypt and their time in the wilderness relying on manna. Third, he is very precise in his account of how Jesus feeds the crowd.

John does not give us an account of the institution of the holy communion in the same way as Matthew, Mark and Luke. He does give us his version of the meal where Jesus washes his disciples' feet before they withdraw to the garden where Judas will betray him. But Jesus does not talk of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. So, we must return to our picnic meal by the Sea of Galilee.

The crowd is in front of Jesus and he has been told about a small supply of bread and a couple of dried or pickled fish. He gets the crowd to sit down in an orderly way. Then he takes the loaves, gives thanks, and distributes them to the people. Crucially, he uses the term eucharistias, unlike the other evangelists in their crowd feeding stories. John tells us that Jesus gave thanks over the bread. Clearly, he is leading us into his teaching on the eucharist. Whilst we know that John is

using this whole chapter to teach us about the Eucharist, the crowd is not yet in on this and most of their questions completely miss the mark.

After Jesus has fed the crowd and they have chased him back across the lake, oblivious to how Jesus crossed it, Jesus now starts to teach them. He explains that he is the bread of life.

Throughout the gospel John uses a series of I am sayings. These, of course, echo the revealing of God to Moses at the burning bush, "I am who I am." They point us to God. With phrases like "I am the bread of life", "I am the resurrection and the life", "I am the way, the truth and the life" John shows us who Jesus is. Jesus is the one who has come down from heaven and he is the bread of life.

When the crowd asks what they must do they are told that what they are to do is to believe in the one who has been sent by God and who does the works of God. Through the dialogue with the crowd, we learn that this bread is not like the bread which nourished the Israelites in the wilderness as they journeyed to the promised land. Jesus explains that that bread was not from Moses but from God, that it perished, and that it is in the past. In contrast Jesus is the one sent by God, the food that he gives does not perish, and that he is here and now. As he told the Samaritan woman at the well, so he tells the crowd, they just need to ask of him; the gifts of God, the bread of life and the living water are there to be received.

As we proceed, John takes us deeper into the mystery of Jesus as the bread of life, the one who nourishes us with himself and gives us eternal life. At the same time the tone changes, there is growing antagonism between Jesus and the crowd, who John starts to refer to as the Jews. In our context that is not helpful since everyone involved in this discussion is Jewish and we shouldn't make anything of the distinction being made. But the developing dispute starts to tap into the crowd's understanding of God, of their history and of who Jesus is. The crowd is arguing both amongst themselves and with Jesus. John wants us to avoid the confusions of the crowd and for us to recognise Jesus as the one sent by God, the one we are to believe in, the one who is the bread of life and who gives us life. And those who feed on that bread are transformed and nourished in Jesus himself, and those who are nourished by him are transformed in him. In recent days we have celebrated great examples of those who have been particularly transformed in their life in Christ: St Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers, Mary Sumner, the founder of the Mothers' Union, and today were it not a Sunday, St Clare, the founder of the Poor Clares living under a Franciscan rule. All of these have been nourished by Jesus, and we too who feed on him, who receive him, are nourished and transformed in him too.

In his great study, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dom Gregory Dix outlined the key actions of the Eucharist as take, give thanks, break and give, echoing what we have just heard in the feeding of the crowd. In the closing section of his book memorably writes:

“Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth...while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church, tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously for the canonization of S. Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with the reasons why [people] have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make...the holy common people of God.”

Today, as we meet in this place, we do the works of God by putting our faith in Jesus and feeding on him who is the bread of life. We **are** obeying the command of Jesus to take bread, give thanks over it, break it and give it so that we too may be nourished and transformed by the one who is the Bread of Life. Amen.

**The Revd Michael Futers, Acting Precentor**