

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

readings: 1 King 8.1,6,10-11,22-30,41-43, Ephesians 6.10-20, John 6.56-69

25 August 2024

Last month the shops were full of them...but in 40 years of teaching I never got one! I refer to those end-of-term gifts for your teacher: socks with Top Teacher written on them, mugs inscribed with the words World's Favourite Teacher. I even saw an advert which said "Can't think what to give your teacher? Why not try a Derbion Gift Card?" ~ a disturbingly explicit monetarisation of the giving process.

Good teachers don't require thanks like that: the satisfaction of a job well done (plus a well-deserved summer break, sadly now coming to an end) will do. And the greatest thank-you gift you can offer is to remember and apply those lessons your teachers tried so hard to teach you.

Who are the teachers you remember most fondly from your schooldays? Is it the ones linked with the half-digested bits of useless theoretical knowledge that you were spoon-fed or sometimes force-fed, so you could regurgitate them under examination conditions? Or is it the ones who could make learning come alive through *stories* that stuck in your mind, with *illustrations* from everyday experience, with pithy *memorable phrases*?

And is not the finest example of this teaching technique to be found in Jesus? Not for him the twee homily or the arid trawl through the arcane thickets of the Jewish Law, but *stories, pictures, metaphors*. 2000 years on, who can forget the story of the Good Samaritan, who cannot summon up a picture of the Feeding of the 5000, who cannot recall the pithy metaphors which took ordinary things of common life and invested them with deep theological meaning: "I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Vine, I am the Bread of Life."

Another fine teaching technique is that of *repetition*: repeating the same idea again and again but in different formats, in the hope that its repetition and restatement will enable it to sink in. I recall as a young teacher, newly married, unthinkingly telling my dear wife that "we need to get a new light bulb, an opaque one, not the ones with clear glass but the ones that are pearlescent, you know the ones that you can't see through" ... to be told she wasn't that stupid, thank you. I didn't make that teacher's mistake again!

I am the Bread of Life says Jesus. It is a phrase which has been repeated in different scenarios in our gospel readings from John chapter 6 over the last 5 weeks, starting from when I last preached to you on July 28th. And since then my colleagues have eloquently unpacked this repeated phrase from a variety of perspectives across these last weeks:

- The crowds, seeking food to assuage their physical hunger and being offered bread in abundance.
- The disciples, seeking signs to assuage their spiritual hunger, and being offered the assurance of the living bread come down from heaven
- The Jews, seeking refuge in their traditional beliefs, unwilling to be open to the arrival of the one who is "making all things new".
- And now today, the disciples yet again, seeking repeated restatement through repetition and reassurance with the option to walk away if they can't hack it.

I am the Bread of Life says Jesus...and it's not just a pithy poetic phrase, it's a metaphor of *brokenness* and *openness*. It reminds us that whilst earthly bread may maintain physical life, far more is needed to sustain spiritual life. The hunger of the human condition can only be fully satisfied when we come to know Christ and through him to know God. It offers us a new relationship with God which can transform mere existence into fullness of life. It makes possible a new covenant with God through Jesus, crucified and risen. And above all it reminds us that *bread must be broken before it can be consumed*.

In this Eucharist we celebrate the memorial of that Bread of Life broken for us. We recall the events of the Last Supper where our Lord took bread, gave thanks, and *broke* it, saying "This is my body which is given for you". And in a few minutes the President will take bread and break it and will say "We *break this* bread to share in the body of Christ". And we will reply: "Though we are many, we are one body because we all *share* in one bread".

Brokenness but also openness...openness to sharing, openness of heart and mind.

I am the Bread of Life says Jesus. When I last preached to you, it was on the story of the Feeding of the 5000 as recorded earlier in this chapter of John's gospel: not simply the physical feeding of the crowd with loaves and fishes, but the educating of the crowd in the concept of *openness*: openness of heart in being shamed into *sharing* what they each individually had, so that all could be *satisfied*, all could be fed.

But in our gospel reading for today it is not the crowds who need educating in openness, it is some of the disciples themselves, those who had followed Jesus so far, but could now go no further, disciples who complain about his repeated bold yet simple assertion that he is the bread of life...the bread that comes down from heaven. How can this be? We know him, we know his mother and father, we know where he lives. How can he now say 'I am the bread that came down from heaven'?

Their minds are closed: they cannot be open to this hard new teaching, they cannot be receptive to this divine claim, they can only judge by human wisdom. They misconstrue the metaphor; they cannot accept the thought that the only way to life is through Jesus's death. And so they walk away. The fellowship of the disciples is broken. Those who are left are not necessarily smarter or more religious than those who have turned aside. They too are free either to follow him or to abandon him. But it Peter who as ever, hits the nail on the head: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life".

Even today, people with closed minds, operating within closed systems, resistant to progress, can never have the openness of mind to accept those words. Only if we are prepared to open our minds to Christ and his teaching, to become open and aware to where God is leading us, can we truly progress. For it is the power of God at work in the world that can challenge and overcome human resistance. It is the example of Jesus that can prise open closed minds.

That example is shown above all in his willingness to lay self aside, even unto death, for what he believed. For the bread of life is shockingly identified with the flesh of Jesus given for the life of the world.

The distinctiveness of this bread is proclaimed in Christ's own words: 'This is my body, *given* for you': a gift of the body that was to be sold for 30 pieces of silver, the body that was given to be tortured on the Cross, that through that gift, and fed by that bread, we might enter into a new covenant, a new relationship with God.

To be fed by Jesus, the bread of life, is by no means a free lunch. By eating of this living bread, broken for us, we walk a new way; we embrace a new philosophy: a philosophy which calls us to give up the broken earthly mindset with its focus on success, luxury and wealth, and replace it with an open concern for our fellow men and women, and a capacity to share our resources with them. *Brokenness leads to openness.*

Archbishop Michael Ramsey, writing some 40 years ago, put it far better than I can today: “The Church is called to be the fellowship of Christ crucified and risen. In the Eucharist it proclaims Christ’s death and feeds upon his life. We are familiar with this; but how tremendous are the implications. It implies a fellowship of Christians marked by an unselfish *openness* to one another in Christ’s name, a like *openness* in the service of the community, and a *commitment* to the way which led to Calvary... Here is the point of impact of the old story of Jesus upon our new world: *die to live*”.

Michael Ramsey: *The Christian Priest Today*, revised edition, SPCK 1985, p33

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