

A joke I recently read: Jesus fed 5,000 people with two fishes and a loaf of bread. That's not a miracle. That's tapas.

What fitting readings on the theme of the “Bread of Life” for Confirmation and Admission into full communicant membership of the Anglican Church of Australia for Remi, Jane, Hayden and Catherine where they will receive and have available the “Bread of Life” for the rest of their lives, through Holy Communion. Let me talk a bit about the huge significance of all of this:

As I mentioned a few weeks ago bread has been the staff of life of people for thousands of years, and while the crowd in our Gospel fails to understand Jesus’ announcement - “I am the bread” - there is little chance that we could miss the meaning: Jesus is the nourishment for our spiritual hungers.

If truth be known humans, then and now, hunger for God. We want to know our lives are not some accidental result of an impersonal nature. There are a few claiming they have no need or hunger for God. They tell us they are content to have the gift of life, without any need or desire to believe that life is given for some purpose or reason. Respecting such people, we sometimes have a hunch that they are denying their inner need for God; or possibly they are spiritually deaf like the person who cannot distinguish between C-natural and F-sharp. Overwhelmingly, and this may surprise us until we think about it, most of the human race wants to know if their hunger for God is matched by a solid reality.

Yet, the hunger driving our search for God is often elusive. Trying to reason for God with our minds, we always fall short of a satisfying conclusion. While reason often can be helpful in our search for God, reason never brings us conclusive proof. Nor is any experience wholly successful in our search for God. We may have a moment where we are convinced we are in the presence of God, but in confessing this experience to my friend, they may say I am only experiencing certain chemical reactions in my brain. We are left in confusion why an experience makes God so real to me, but to someone else it is just physiological activity. Nor does moral behaviour give us any certainty in our search for God. We may think that right living brings us close to God, yet there are always those painful times when our moral uprightness only brings us pain and misery, like Job in the Old Testament. God is not found in righteous living. Reason, experience, and upright living can hint at the presence and reality of God, but they cannot fill our hunger in any satisfactory or complete fashion.

Our prosperous society tries to eliminate our quest for God by shooting the planes on the runway, by the peddling of the carefree living delusion - “eat, drink, and be merry.” Pleasure and personal happiness can cover our hunger for God, meaning that we will never feel any sense of cosmic alienation, or be overwhelmed by the ultimate questions of “Why?” “Where?” or “Whence?” This care free delusion has reached its zenith in our world to the point of falling apart as the horrors of consumerism leave their trail of increasing carnage in people’s lives. The proponents of pleasure and happiness never tell us that their way is doomed from the start. Similar to a drug, the ante for pleasure and happiness is upped, until pleasure and happiness cannot be reproduced. It may only be in later life that we fully get to see the “folly” of our youth. The temptation to throw off our God-hunger, opting for pleasure and happiness, is an invitation to personal and social disaster.

Another tempting offer in exchange for wrestling with our God question is the focus on success and power. This seductive option is quite alive and well in our culture. Economic, political, artistic, athletic, and church success are offered as the answers to the meaning of life. Grasping any one of these offers serves to cancel out the urgency of our hunger for God. Corporate success, being elected to high political office, nailing down an Academy Award, receiving awards of achievement or status amongst our peers, captaining the winning team in the AFL, ministering or belonging to one of the visibly successful mega-churches, are all held up for admiration and pride. Never are we told of the high price involved in such success. Getting to the top often means involvement in some kind of dishonesty and betrayal of one's personal values. Success can come at the price of the abandonment of quality relationships with family and friends. As we think about the cost of chasing after success, we think of Jesus who warned that in gaining the whole world, we could lose our own soul.

What then might Jesus mean by nourishing our hunger for God? He doesn't mean some reasonable theological answer. Nor does he mean that we'll find God if we live the godly life. And he certainly doesn't mean for us to drive into the pleasurable life, or climb on the success bandwagon. He says that the starting point is when we start to think on him the "Bread of Life" and give ourselves to the needs of others, to consider and regard others in a charitable fashion, to stop putting our agendas first- as St Paul elaborates in our reading from Ephesians this morning- then we will begin to discover the presence of God. Some modern Christians have described Jesus as "the man for others." In responding to this example, we will discover that HE is the answer to our deepest hunger.

When we pick up on Jesus' claim that God is discovered as we give ourselves over to the needs of others, as we become charitable to others, we find the answer to another important hunger - our hunger for trust. This is the hunger for confidence in the meaning of life, despite so much arguing against this hope.

This hunger can never be understood separate from our hunger for God, as it speaks to something we confront along the way. God's goodness seems so vulnerable. The goodness of creation outlined in chapter 1 of Genesis is up against a host of destructive forces. Cancers, tornadoes, earthquakes, birth defects - are some of the things questioning the goodness of creation. When we move into the human scene we find much more doubting the trustworthiness of life. Foremost is our human tendency to put our own needs and our own agendas always ahead of others, to be uncharitable, grasping and controlling violating the call of Jesus to give ourselves away for our neighbours, at a personal level, or in seeking justice. People are easily content to live at the expense of others, seduced by power and control which cries out for a radical conversion and change of our inward looking nature.

Furthermore, the pessimism of our current world is telling us to doubt the durability of people and our Christian values. We have a serious hunger to trust the direction of history.

Jesus the "Bread of Life" answers this hunger, too. His witness, always falling short of unassailable confidence, invites us to trust that none of the threats to nature, humanity, or the cosmos that are beyond God's power to overcome. The resurrection suggests this confidence and trust. At Golgotha, the followers of Jesus the "Bread of Life" were convinced that his mission and ministry were at an end. They fled back to the safety of Galilee, resuming their previous lives. Today, we would say that they were caught up in the paralysis of grief. Then something extraordinary happened. They became convinced that the crucified Jesus, now the spiritual Christ, was calling them to resume his mission and ministry. They concluded the forces of death were destroyed. They were empowered to carry on

the work of Jesus then “Bread of Life”, even more effectively than before. It was almost as if Jesus had to die to make it possible for them to really become his followers.

Out of this experience, the disciples discovered confidence in the ultimate goodness of reality. They did not always express their confidence in philosophical, or in cogent theological ways. But this confidence possessed them. Like them, experiencing the resurrection in the church, and through following Jesus the “Bread of Life” like those first disciples, we, too, are offered a trust in the unshakable goodness of life - do you have a trust in the unshakeable goodness of life, does this possess your soul? Then, now, and always. Jesus the “Bread of Life” brings this experience to our hunger for ultimate trust.

There is often an un-admitted hunger for eternal life. We may not find this a disparate need for ourselves. Life may have been good and we have no complaints that would be met only by eternal life. Yet, there is sadness about death that makes it impossible for us to think that the death of a loved one would not be mourned, or that we would not wish their life in some way to go on. We cannot stand at the graveside of our mate or partner, and not hope for a continuous life for them. We are dishonest with our inner self when we say we do not desire life after death for ourselves or for any of our loved ones.

However, we easily wish for a life after death for those whose earthly life has been one of pain, oppression, and failure. There is an innate sense that justice and opportunity has been denied to so many that some life beyond this one would give us a feeling of justice. It is not a question of whether or not God is capable of raising up these unfortunates and ourselves to a life beyond this one. It is a concern that a minimal sense of ultimate mercy and love suggest the possibility. It is worth noting that when an afterlife began to find its way into biblical faith, it was just at this point. The biblical people mourned the death of many young men in the Maccabean wars, having their future dramatically cut short. In response, many began to wonder if God might not take them into an eternal and everlasting life. We have a whole beautiful Chapel, the Memorial Chapel, here at Holy Trinity Kew built on that one belief for 75 Kew boys and 1 girl.. So life after death or life eternal begins as a question of justice.

Yet none of us are beyond this justice concern. Even if our lives have been fairly meaningful and filled with the blessings of loved ones, of significant labour, of sufficient food, clothing, and shelter, and of many joys of art, music, and culture- there are still unfilled possibilities. These might be our own failures of love, missed opportunities, realising late in life that something is missing, - not appreciating life, not caring when caring was really important, or not opting for the risky true self, rather, instead of the predictable safe. Sometimes it's when we rue that we have not admitted our own worst impulses or when we have not measured up to life's responsibilities that life after death becomes a concern. All of us go into death without fulfilling all we might have been and experienced. The question becomes, is failure the defining assessment of our lives? Or, are there eternal opportunities still ahead?

Jesus is the nourishment, the “Bread of Life” nourishing our concern for eternal life. Granted that in John's Gospel, eternal life means, first of all, a life with God here and now. This rich understanding of eternal life claims God is not a far-away God who meets us only in the moment of our deaths.

Eternal life in John's Gospel does have its eternal meaning. In John, Jesus says that eternal life begins now and has no end. Cosmologists tell us they can detect sounds lingering from the earliest

moments of creation following the Big Bang. Couldn't we think that something as wonderful as a human life might exist equally as long as creation's initial noises?

As always, Jesus the "Bread of Life's" answer to our hunger for eternal life is a matter of faith. In the realm of the spirit we always live short of undoubted conclusions. There is no other possibility. But to those of us who chance these teasing hints, we are filled with life, joy, and meaning, fuelled by the "Bread of Life" that nothing can take away from us and is discernible to all those around us, for better or worse!

In the Holy Eucharist this morning we again involve ourselves in the wonderful opportunity to enter in a very intimate way the foretaste of the heavenly, eternal banquet which we will enjoy in full in the next life.

Fr Robert Newton