

WHICH BREAD: OF LIFE OR DEATH?¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 12 August 2018

This morning's reading from 2 Samuel depicts one of the great moments of biblical history: David mourning over the death of his son, Absalom. In reality, however, it is far from a good story. It is the culmination of a tragic series of events in David's troubled family. As was then appropriate for a great king, David was polygamous with eight named wives and other unnamed wives and concubines. At least twenty of his children are mentioned by name in the Old Testament. As was also usual in those days, these large families were full of intrigue about the succession to the throne, which did not go automatically to the first-born. His ultimate successor, was David's tenth named son, Solomon, born of Bathsheba, who is number eight in the list of wives.

David's first-born son was Amnon, his second, Daniel and his third, Absalom, from three different mothers.² The records do not list David's daughters except for Tamar, Absalom's full sister. Both Absalom and Tamar are said to have been beautiful. Tamar was sufficiently attractive to draw the attention of her half-brother, Amnon, who, after she rebuffed him, raped her.

David was angry but took no action against Amnon because he was his first-born. It fell to Absalom to take revenge for the attack on his sister. He organised a party for the king's sons and, after they had all consumed much wine, his servants slew Amnon.³ Absalom continued to live in Jerusalem but avoided his father. Instead, he moved among the people talking sedition and, eventually, mounted a rebellion against David.⁴

Before the final battle, David ordered that Absalom not be killed but his general Joab understood better than David the threat posed by Absalom and killed him. This is the prelude to David's tears. Afterwards, Joab reprimanded David for ignoring the officers who had saved both his life and his kingdom.⁵ David's rule was in great danger.

I want to turn now to this morning's gospel. Although this is Year B when we read from St Mark, we are in the middle of a five-week interlude with Chapter 6 of St John's gospel. The whole of this chapter is devoted to the concept of Jesus as the Bread of Life and begins with the story of the feeding of the five thousand, which we would have read two weeks ago, had it not been our Patronal Festival. The chapter ends with Peter affirming the disciples' belief in the Master and the first warning that the group includes Jesus' betrayer.

In his online blog, Andrew McGowan of Yale University noted that this chapter "depends on the centrality of bread, and the reality of food insecurity."⁶ He says this partly because the miracle of the loaves and fishes identifies the bread as being made of barley, the food of the rural poor. Wheat bread was the food of the urban middle and upper classes. Because this is the bread of the poor, it is important to gather up any remnants. Although Jesus criticises his

¹ Readings: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 14, 31-35; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

² 1 Chronicles 3:1-9

³ 2 Samuel 13

⁴ 2 Samuel 14-18

⁵ 2 Samuel 19

⁶ <http://abmcg.blogspot.com/2018/06/your-fill-of-loaves-johannine-sign-of.html>

hearers because they follow him for the bread that was used in the miracle, the food insecurity is real.

This chapter is, therefore, set in a serious reality of daily life, not, as we might suppose, in the context of a theoretical theological proposition. Its connection to the actual life of the community for which John wrote is clear.

Today's reading is part of the extended discussion in response to the feeding miracle. It begins with an attempt to undercut Jesus by way of an *ad personam* argument. What Jesus says cannot be true because we know who he really is: the son of that carpenter in Nazareth; don't we know all his family?

If Jesus is the bread of life, is there a bread of death? Jesus hinted other kinds of bread in this morning's gospel when he noted that, while the manna in the wilderness sustained life temporarily, those people still died. He made a similar comment to the Samaritan woman he met at the well, saying that those who drink from the well will thirst again.⁷ Yet, I don't think that he was suggesting manna as a bread of death or the well's water as water of death. He recognised the necessity of eating and drinking. He made a more figurative reference.

If we think back to the temptation in the wilderness, we find Jesus rejecting Satan's suggestion that he have the angels make bread out of the stones that were lying around him.⁸ Perhaps that power, the temptation to be a feeding ruler, is the bread of death? Certainly, accepting the tempting offer to feed people materially would have meant the death of the gospel. We may, therefore, read a reference to the temptation into what Jesus was saying about himself.

The lectionary compilers did not set up this morning's story of David as a foil to the gospel reading⁹ but you will forgive me if I create such a foil myself. The story of David fulfilled the prophecy that Samuel made when the people asked for a monarchy to be set up in Israel. All the abuses of power that he predicted came about. As we have seen, David's family was torn apart by violent acts. His desperate cry for Absalom is human and terrible in every respect but we can see how the temptation of power became the bread of death for him. As Nathan said in last week's reading from 2 Samuel, the sword did not depart from his house.¹⁰

It is not only, or even most importantly, the violence of the David story that leads to this conclusion. After all, the story of Jesus has its share of violence, hints of which are in this morning's gospel. It is that the bread doesn't satisfy. The pursuit of power within David's court was never ending and never fulfilling. For every apparent victory, another contender appeared on the scene. The bread of death makes us hungrier and hungrier. It never satisfies. Its form is in whatever displaces God for us.

Jesus says that the bread of life is sufficient, that it satisfies. That bread of life is on offer for as long as it takes us to accept it and eat.

A prayer by Walter Brueggemann

We are strange conundrums of faithfulness and fickleness.

⁷ John 4:13-14

⁸ Matthew 4:1-4; Luke 4:1-4

⁹ I say this because, in the Revised Common Lectionary, the Old Testament readings are set in sequences. Any link with the gospel readings is coincidental, not planned.

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 12:10

We cleave to you in all the ways that we are able.
We count on you and intend our lives to be lived for you,
and then we find ourselves among your people
who are always seeking elsewhere and otherwise.
So we give thanks that you are the God
who yearns and waits for us,
and that our connection
to you is always from your side,
and that it is because of your goodness
that neither life nor death
nor angels nor principalities
nor heights nor depths
nor anything in creation
can separate us from you.
We give thanks for your faithfulness,
so much more durable than ours. Amen.¹¹

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003, p. 135.
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