

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Pentecost 11

(b-os 19)

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“That we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us”

Readings: 2 Samuel 18: 5-9, 14, 31-33; Psalm 130;
 Ephesians 4: 25- 5:2; John 6: 35, 41-51.

Christian Shame and Scandal

I suppose we would be rightly upset if the media made some totally outlandish and unjust claim concerning our church and its worship. How would we feel if it was said that we performed ‘evil and satanic rites in defiance of the law’. Now I must admit that there are moments with our current media that I think that such a report is not that far off; and I am sure that some of the more extreme claims made by some of our shock-jocks about Islam already fit that category.

There has been many instances down through the history of Christianity when unfounded and scurrilous claims have been made about the followers of Christ. This has more often than not been directed between the different Christian churches, but the early church also received its more than fair share of misrepresentation, disinformation, and scandalous remarks against it. Indeed, in the second century, Christians were sometimes accused of sexual debauchery, human sacrifice and cannibalism by their critics.

Understandably, the allegories and metaphors of the church have sometimes contributed to this. The talk of loving one another, agape meals, the sacrifice of Jesus (the son of God), and the highly nuanced imagery of eating flesh and drinking blood in the Eucharist is likely to trouble anyone of a literalist disposition. To some ears, such things speak of untold evil and would therefore justify why Christians should be removed from the face of the earth. The second century Roman political and propaganda machine therefore seized on some of these warped views to help justify why the authorities should persecute this rising Jewish sect.

Similar accusations and distortions are often levelled against minority groups, dissenting religions, and political opponents; even in our own times. As I have said, there are comments made by ignorant and bigoted people about Islam and other religions in our own society that fall into this category.

I am the Bread of Life

So what are we to make of Jesus' words, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst'? Indeed, these words and others that follow, such as; 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him' are very hard sayings; how can we understand them?

The Bible uses the images of eating and drinking regularly as a symbol of life. For instance, the story of the feeding of the 5,000 reveals the Kingdom of God as a place where there is an abundance of food for all. Over the next couple of weeks the gospel readings will pursue more of John chapter 6 and today's theme of Jesus being the 'bread of life'. All these images speak of spiritual nourishment and draw us to the images and metaphors present in the celebration of Holy Communion.

We call this worship in which we now participate a 'Eucharist'. The word 'Eucharist' comes from an ancient Greek word 'ευχαριστω' which means 'to give thanks'. Our worship is therefore described as a thanksgiving - a time to give thanks to God for the blessings he has given us.

The liturgy of Eucharist is made up of two essential elements, being the 'ministry of the word' and the 'ministry of the sacrament'. To be sure, it is not just in worship, but these two themes run right through our lives as Christians - for we are called to live lives of 'word' and 'sacrament'.

The Word of God

Let us first consider the ministry of word (or divine revelation). The concept of 'word' is a major theme in John's Gospel. You will remember the Gospel begins;

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1-2)

The concept of 'word', in Greek 'λογος', is more than just about 'speech' or 'text'; it also means message, idea or revelation. The 'word' then, is God in action - a creating, revealing, understanding, and redeeming concept that we now call the gospel. The gospel is therefore not only a narrative about Jesus, but is also the revelation of the idea of God that lies behind it.

Because we grapple with a God who is theologically beyond our understanding, (and anything less would be merely something of our own creation – an idol), then a large amount of imagery and symbolism is required. This is therefore a poetic engagement.

Symbolically, it is interesting to note that in the Old Testament bread is sometimes used as a representation of God's divine word. It can also be a symbol of 'wisdom', and 'torah' (God's law), and also of 'understanding'. So when Jesus says 'I am the bread of life' he may also mean 'I am wisdom', or perhaps 'I am revelation' or even 'I am God's creative presence in the world'.

Jesus invites those who hear his word to 'come to him', which is to say for people to believe or trust in him. The reaction to the good news or message then is belief - a response of the mind as well as the heart. This is a belief to be discovered in relationship rather than ideas.

Today's gospel text goes on to say;

'It is written in the prophets, 'and they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.'

(John 6:45-48)

John chapter six contains several passages that contrast Moses with Jesus. Moses was the receiver of the law (or God's rule). This was God's revelation to his people as they wandered in the wilderness before entering the promised-land. In John's Gospel Jesus is likened to a 'new Moses' who brings a new revelation. Indeed, Jesus himself is the revelation, he is the message of God's presence in the world and in humanity.

Just a short aside at this juncture regarding the term 'Torah'. We often translate it as 'law'. However Torah does not only refer to rules and regulations but is more importantly seen as a 'way of life'. The mistake made by the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, (and many neo-Pharisees in our own time), was to turn a way of living into a rigid set of rules that bound the people up rather than liberated them.

We do the same thing today by requiring beliefs to be held in a particular way and for people to behave according to a 'Godly behaviour' or piety, as set by religious authorities. We too can run the risk of turning God's 'word' or revelation into a rigid set of sacred rules and doctrines. Yet, we also need to remember that God's 'word' is the liberating Gospel message, not a collection of inerrant doctrines bound by a particular method of interpreting the scriptures and governing the minutiae of life.

The Messianic Banquet

There is another Old Testament symbol or concept termed 'the messianic banquet'. Many Jews came to understand that the experience of the Messiah and his Kingdom would be like a great banquet at which the people would be invited to feast with God. In time the banquet was also associated with the Passover meal.

While the term ‘bread of life’ may refer to God’s revelation or ‘word’, it may just as strongly be understood through the image of ‘messianic banquet’ as a sign of God’s presence in the world and therefore as ‘sacrament’.

A sacrament is understood as an act through which we receive God’s grace. The old catechism used to describe it as; *‘an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace’*. The Church has formalised several sacraments, of which Baptism and Communion are the principal ones. Nevertheless, it can also be understood that there are thousands and thousands of acts through which we may have an experience of God’s grace, and therefore may serve as sacraments (or more correctly as ‘sacramentals’) for us.

John chapter six has clear Eucharistic and sacramental overtones, such as when Jesus said;

‘I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’
(John 6:51)

The mention of manna also has Eucharistic overtones. St Paul develops this in his First Letter to the Corinthians where he refers to the supernatural food and drink that the Hebrews had in the wilderness. This is the bread from heaven. Likewise we find this idea in the ‘real presence’ of Christ coming down in Communion.

In Eucharist the elements of word and sacrament coalesce and complement each other. The word is the revelation of God’s purpose for his people, and the sacrament is a sign of his loving and intimate presence in our lives.

Jesus promises to be with us at the breaking of the bread. Indeed, the bread he offers is himself. This bread is a sign of God’s love for his people, a sign of offering by which we remind ourselves each time we come and celebrate the Eucharist together. It is not so much something to be understood as a mystery to be experienced.

The reformer, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, therefore got it right in the Prayer of Humble Access, (which we sadly no longer use in our liturgies), when we pray;

*‘...grant us therefore gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood,
that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.’*