

Sunday 4 August 2024, Trinity 10 Parish Eucharist

John 6. 24-35

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

How many of you had toast for breakfast sometime in the past week? I wonder how many of you are regular toast-eaters. It's s staple breakfast food, toast. So much of a staple in fact that if one were to have toast- just a single slice- for breakfast every day, one would consume around one store-bought loaf of bread every month. Twelve loaves a year. One hundred and twenty loaves a decade. Fifty years of toast for breakfast is 6000 loaves of bread. And yet, after all this delicious toast- sometimes with butter and jam, occasionally with Nutella perhaps- after all this toast, one would still be hungry. Six thousand loaves-worth of toast would not be sufficient to sate our hunger, the hunger of a lifetime.

It is not without good reason that Jesus talks to the people about bread. He knows they know how much of a staple it is, and how often they need to eat it to remain full. They have just been filled, in fact, with the miraculous bread that Jesus gave them: five small barley loaves (and two fish). And they have followed him to the other side of a lake, likely in hope that he will give them more. Jesus says to them, *You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.* You've followed your stomachs, he says. You're coming to me because you think I'll do the same thing again, produce for you what you need to survive, so that you won't be hungry today. But you've missed the point. *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.*

You aren't here because you want to know the truth behind the miraculous bread. You're here because your tummies are rumbling. You are concerned with the outward things, but you neglect the deeper things, the reality behind the sign. And in this way you're just like your ancestors, he says. Do you remember that bread that Moses gave your forefathers in the desert? They complained for lack of food and there fell the manna from heaven, the 'what is it' that was made into little cakes. Fresh on the ground, this manna fell every morning. For forty years. Your ancestors ate their fill for forty years and, he says a little later, they ate and they died. And so many of them missed the point. They were grateful for the bread from heaven, but they failed to see the reality to which the sign pointed: it pointed to me. *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

Six thousand loaves of bread. Forty years of manna. 'Give us this day our daily bread.' 'We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.' What is the point? I am, says Jesus. I am the point. I am the true bread to which all these signs are pointing; I'm here, and all you care to ask me to do is give you more barely loaves to stop your tummies rumbling for a few hours. Our Lord can and does provide for our physical needs. It is why we ask for our daily bread. But the bread we eat with chew with our mouths is only part of our need. Because we are more than just bodies needing to be fed. Jesus knows this and he offers something more: the bread that satisfies.

Let me ask another question of you. How many of you are satisfied with the little round piece of bread we give you at communion? It's not really the nicest, is it? A bit styrofoamy, right? Did you know it's meant to resemble manna? *It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey,* says the book of Exodus. Round, flat, white bread given out every day in this church; it is food for our earthly pilgrimage, whether that be for forty or even eighty years. We wander in the wilderness of this world and we, the priests, give you bread. But are you still hungry? Because the point Jesus is making, and the point I hope we are making at each eucharist when the bread is lifted up is that this bread is a sign of something more. This bread is a sign of the body of Jesus lifted up on the cross. This bread which you take in your hand is the precious body of the little baby born in Bethlehem. It is the precious body of the man tenderly taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. When you eat this bread you 'do carnally and visibly press with [your] teeth the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ'. But do you taste the bread of life?

Our fathers in the faith were not so enamoured of the bread itself that they failed to recognise the Body it represents. Article XXVIII of our church says, 'The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the [eucharist], only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the [eucharist] is Faith.' You can eat the manna and still be hungry. You can come to communion and still be hungry. Because it is not the bread that satisfies, but the person the bread signifies. *I am the bread of life.* Do you believe this? As spiritually hungry as you are- and we all are hungry in this way- as hungry as you are, do you believe that Jesus can satisfy? Do you believe that he can take away the hunger you feel and cannot fill, even with 6000 loaves-worth of bread? *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* If you are hungry and thirsty today, come to Jesus. Come in faith and receive the bread which is his body and the wine that is his blood, and eat and drink, not merely the sign, but by faith the reality of him. *Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven... Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* Amen.