

Trinity 11, Eucharist

Ephesians 4: 25-5:2 and John 6: 35, 41-51.

Mother Emma

My family and I recently returned from Italy, and so last Sunday evening we were present at the Roman Catholic Mass at the Cathedral in Sorrento. The readings at the services were, of course, the same ones which were being read and preached about here at St Mary Abbots, and I was very aware of the additional sense of "communion" which draws people together across countries, languages and denominations to study the Word of God, and to respond to his Word in the great thanksgiving of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Having said that, although more or less able to make out the passages from Scripture in the pew sheet, when it came to understanding the sermon my minimal Italian rather broke down. Perhaps because I generally only use Italian to order food in cafes and restaurants(!), I found that apart from the name of Jesus only three other words, frequently repeated, were clear to me: hunger, give and bread. In some ways I was sad that I couldn't follow what was clearly an impassioned and emphatic sermon full of anecdotes, but I was also very struck by the fact that those four words summed up not only the readings for the day, but also the meaning of the Eucharist and the faith we express whenever we pray, "*Give us today our daily bread*".

Today, as we consider the final part of Jesus' discourse about himself as the living bread which came down from heaven, we hear again those four words, hunger, Jesus, give and bread, but add one more to them – the word "Life".

Throughout the readings we have heard over the past few weeks, we have been reminded of the many stories from the Bible in which God supplies bread for his people's needs, demonstrating his nurture, his compassion and his generosity. We have heard again the well-known story of the manna miraculously provided every day to feed the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness; and of the angel who brought Elijah, despairing and depressed, a loaf of bread to sustain him for his further ministry. Jesus has described himself repeatedly as the "*bread of life*" and the "*bread which came down from heaven*", as he does in our reading again today. He explains that he comes to feed the hungry and to give drink to the thirsty, and above all, that he brings life to all those who come to him.

It is perhaps not surprising that hospitality and welcome lie at the heart of Christian teaching and practice, with our central act of worship the sharing of food and the welcoming of all to the table. But today, Jesus emphasises not only that he is the living bread, but that "*the bread that [he gives] for the life of the world is [his] flesh.*"

There seems little doubt that St John, in writing the Gospel, was himself thinking of the Christian practice of breaking bread and sharing wine, in obedience to Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "*This is my Body, given for you... do this in remembrance of me.*" Jesus points ahead to eternity, and the promise that those who follow him and obey God's teaching will have everlasting life. But he also urges us to remember that this promise of eternal life, the knowledge that we are loved and nurtured and forgiven our sins, came at a cost – that of his own act of self-sacrifice on the Cross.

As we share in the privilege of the hospitality of the altar, we are vividly reminded that in following Christ, we are called to extend his sacrificial love, compassion and generosity to all those made in the image of God, even when this comes at a price for us too.

This week has seen terrifying scenes in this country which demonstrate the very opposite of hospitality and compassion. Yet it has also been heartening to see others stand up with courage and conviction to speak out or to stand together against violence and hatred, against the targeting of people who have already suffered so much.

Centuries of the Christian Church have revealed the love of God to others, by welcoming, feeding, sharing and supporting those in need and in fear. We are moulded by the knowledge that Jesus gave up his own life for us on the Cross, in the most grisly and appalling fashion, himself hounded by a mob which had been stirred up against him, even though they had shouted for joy at his arrival in Jerusalem just days before. He would have experienced the fear and isolation of those who find themselves attacked in such ways today, and he did so for us, to show us that true sacrifice means putting others before ourselves.

Jesus himself commanded us to come together and to experience his presence as we share in the bread and the wine, remembering his act of self-sacrifice on the Cross; fully present with him as we receive his love, his power, his wonderful promise of eternal life. But to return to our original five words, as we come to Jesus and are given the bread of the sacrament to satisfy our spiritual hunger, we are also inspired and strengthened to live the life of the risen Christ, sharing in God's mission of bringing peace and justice to the world.

The Church has adapted the words of St Francis for this time of tension, to suggest how this might be done:

*Heavenly Father, we cry out to you for our country -
we ask that you make us instruments of Your peace.
Where there is racial hatred, help us to sow Your love.
Where there is injury, help us to heal and bring pardon.
Where there is discord, help us to bring harmony.
Where there is error, and misinformation let us bring truth.
Where there is doubt that we are all your children, let us bring faith;
Where there is despair, let us bring hope.*

Amen