

Sermon: The living bread

I'm sure we've all been enjoying the coverage of the Olympics over the last two weeks – it's been a great lockdown distraction... and daytime television is definitely going to go downhill after the closing ceremony tonight.

The coverage has also reminded me of our visit to Japan back in 2018 – Sam, our now son-in-law, was studying over there, so we went to visit him, and we got to see quite a bit of Japan when we did.

It is a fantastic place to visit. We all loved it.

One of the great things about visiting Japan – and there were many great things about visiting Japan – is the food. It is delicious, and it is – compared to Australia – generally very cheap.

And there is an immense variety of Japanese food. Our common perception of Japanese food is raw fish, but Japanese cuisine is vast – there are lots and lots of options and lots and lots of different places to eat at.

Japanese people eat about as much protein per capita as we do in Australia. Traditionally, their major protein source has been fish, but in the last few years it's been overtaken by beef. But fish – and chicken eggs and to a lesser extent pork still feature prominently.

The only complaint was that good coffee is rare.

But across all the Japanese food options, there is one commonality. Just about every meal features rice. Yes, you can go to McDonalds and get a rice free meal of burger and fries (for a bit less than you would in Australia), and there are a few other options, but mostly, there's rice.

In fact, most Japanese home cooked meals will consist of soup (miso soup), salad, beef or fish, and rice. A large bowl of rice.

Rice is really important to the Japanese people: Per capita consumption of rice is nearly 58kg a year. By comparison, Australian's eat just under 20kg of rice per annum, and Americans just under 12kg.

Rice is so fundamental to Japanese life that they are determined to be at least self-sufficient in rice. And as a result, so much of the land is given over to rice production. If there's flat land, with access to get a car to – and a rice harvesting machine is about the same size as a small car – they can grow rice, and they generally do.

The larger and rounder the grain the better. And there is rivalry between regions of Japan about who has the best, the most flavoursome, rice.

Rice is their staple. All the other things they eat are important, but it's rice that underpins their cuisine, it's the rice that fills them, the rice that satisfies them. We had an expat American guide who is married to a Japanese, and he asked me what the staple in Australia was. And that's something I had to think about.

Certainly, in the early days of European settlement it was bread, and I think for much of the 20th century, potatoes featured in most Australian meals... although our rice consumption has increased dramatically over the last 30 or 40 years. But bread – or more broadly wheat, because we eat an awful lot of pasta these days, and the odd pizza too – is as close to the idea of a staple as we get.

Back in Jesus' time in Israel, just like the early days of European settlement in Australia, and just like Italy before Marco Polo brought back noodles from China, thereby introducing pasta, and just like most of Europe for thousands of years, the staple was bread.

And just like life in Japan is unimaginable without rice, life in New Testament times in Israel would have been unimaginable without bread. In fact, life wouldn't have lasted very long without bread.

This morning's reading from John's gospel begins with Jesus saying "I am the living bread that came down from heaven"

When we hear Jesus saying he's the living bread or the bread of life, we in the church tend to jump to thinking of the Last Supper. We think of Holy Communion and the bread and wine that represent Jesus giving his life for us.

And that is right, but at this point in the gospel account, we need to remember that Jesus had not had the last supper. We shouldn't take this simply as Jesus foreshadowing the last supper. Jesus is saying something here that had meaning to those who were listening at the time, and has meaning apart from the last supper and Holy Communion.

And as happens, Jesus' listeners didn't get it – as they so often didn't, and they jump to the wrong conclusion.

Jesus says: "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."

And John tells us that The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52)

When John uses the term “The Jews” he doesn’t generally mean all the Jewish, it’s often a shorthand way of referring to the group that the other gospel writers refer to as “the scribes and the pharisees” or the “teachers of the law and the Sadducees” and so on. And sometimes it seems to refer to those Jewish people who had already rejected Jesus.

But they didn’t get it. They jumped to images of cannibalism – “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked.

And I’ve got to say that what Jesus tells them next, doesn’t help them understand...

From verse 53, “Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

Jesus goes down the track of talking about flesh and blood. As modern Christians, we’re used to this sort of imagery in the church, but to his original listeners it would have been absolutely shocking. Human flesh – a dead body is unclean according to Jewish law, and any sort of blood is unclean. We can see it, of course, in terms of the last supper and in terms of Jesus body being given up and his blood pouring out on the cross – but to those first century folks it would have been outrageous.

But Jesus goes on to say “...and I will raise them up on the last day” so it wouldn’t be the end of Jesus, even though he was saying people would be eating his flesh and drinking his blood, he would still be around.

Somehow – and remember that his original listeners didn’t know about the last supper or his death and resurrection at this point – and somehow, Jesus told them, he would be there on the last day to raise them up. Despite people eating his flesh and drinking his blood, he would still be there on the last day to raise them up.

Jesus talks about a connection between himself, who he calls the Son of Man, and his flesh and his blood, and his people – the people who feed on him – when he says in verses 55 and 56, “For my flesh is real food and my blood is

real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.

Jesus gives us a glimpse of how this works, how this is possible, when he tells his listeners: “Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” (6:56-57)

It goes beyond just a connection between Jesus and his people, to a connection between God the Father, who sent Jesus, and his people. And what’s more, Jesus is not just a solution to the problems of the world, but he’s a permanent solution.

Over the course of history, God saved his people time and time and as we read the Old Testament, we see the same thing happening time and time again, the people drifting away, and God intervening – through Noah, through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through Moses, through the judges, through the prophets, through kings and champions, to bring the people back, to save God’s people from catastrophe. But none of those interventions were permanent.

Jesus spells it out here to his listeners in the last verse of today’s gospel reading: “This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” (6:58)

You probably know the story of the manna from heaven which we have in the books of Exodus (16:1-36) and Numbers (11:1-9). When the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness, God provided them with food in the form of manna, which was flakes which appeared in the ground like frost each morning. It sustained them day to day – and in fact two days over the sabbath.

But the bread of life that Jesus talks about – the bread of life that Jesus is isn’t like that, because the manna just sustained them for a day or two. And then only when they were in the wilderness.

Manna was their staple – but only for a short time, and the people returned to bread when they left the wilderness. Bread became their staple again, and remained the staple until Jesus time, and more or less to the present day. They ate other things of course, but bread was their staple. It filled them, it satisfied them.

And then Jesus comes along here in John Chapter six, to them, “I am the living bread” or perhaps, “I am the staple.” He’s saying, effectively, I am the thing that fills us up and that satisfies. The soup and salad and whatever else there may be, don’t work without the staple.

And John chapter six has a lot about bread in it: it begins with Jesus miraculously feeding of the 5000 men plus women and children with five small loaves of bread and two small fish.

Not long after, Jesus told the crowd who had followed him across the lake that they were only following because he’d fed them ... and that they should be seeking something more than just food for the day.

He tells then in that memorable verse (6:45) “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

We should remember, of course, that we need food every day, and when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he included “Give us today our daily bread”. But don’t forget, as Matthew tells us, Jesus also said, quoting the book of Deuteronomy, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt 4:4, Deut 8:3)

Jesus did feed the 5000 plus women and children – and the other crowds – with bread, their staple, but he also offered them something more important – and more permanent.

Jesus says [he is] the living bread that came down from heaven

And the pattern of the people drifting away, and God saving them, over and over again, ended with Jesus. No more do the people need judges or champions or kings or prophets, because Jesus is the permanent solution to the problems of the world – Jesus, in his death and resurrection, reconciles people to God not for a short time, not even for a lifetime, but forever.

Jesus says [he is] the living bread that came down from heaven

Jesus is saying he is the staple of their lives. What came before was good. The law and the prophets had provided some nourishment to sustain the people of God. The manna in the desert was fine - it was sent by God after all – but it didn’t last.

And we need to make sure that Jesus is our staple, too.

We need to remember that it is Jesus is that spiritually really feeds us and gives us life which lasts.

We sometimes lose sight of that fact. There is so much to feed on in our lives and even in the church. There's community and fellowship and charity and family and all the rest - and all of those things and more are good, but they are just the beef teriyaki and the miso soup and salad which go with the rice – the staple of Japanese life. And sometimes those things may just be the snacks between meals for us.

Jesus is the staple. He's the one who gives us life, and not simply life today, but life everlasting. It is Jesus who gives us eternal life. By feeding on him and taking him into our hearts and lives we receive life. You can survive on all the other things day to day, but if you do that, there will always be something missing, and those other things will surely come to an end.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (6:51)

We need to make sure that we, as individuals, and as a church are eating that bread. We need to make sure that we are focused on Jesus, and not being distracted from him by all the other things of our lives – however good and tasty they may seem.

Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven, and the one who eats the bread Jesus offers will live forever.

The offer is there for all of us, and for the whole world. The living bread is there for us. And it's there for us to share with others.

Jesus is there for us today, tomorrow, and always – so let us feed on him in our hearts for our days to come.

Amen