

## **The Bread of Life** - John 6:24-35

It was the afternoon of Monday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020, and I was at Woolworths St Ives, doing the weekly grocery shopping, and as I approached the northern end of the supermarket, it got noisier and noisier. There was a crowd of people there... about a third of them had their phones out making desperate phone calls, another third had their phones out and were taking photos, and the last third were frantically grabbing every packet of toilet paper in sight. It was the start of the Covid-19 panic striking suburban Sydney...

A week later I went to back to Woollies, and the only tinned food left on the shelves was mushrooms and beetroot (which would certainly have made for an interesting casserole). The pasta and rice shelves were empty. A person walking past said 'We're all going to starve!'. I wasn't particularly worried about starving though, because the other sections of Woollies were well stocked – we were going to be fine, as long as we were happy with meat, fresh vegetables, Easter eggs and hot cross buns. And bread.

Everyone, in their rush to get to the rice and pasta, had gone past the bread! Rice and pasta are the foundation of many modern Australian meals, but it's bread that's been the real staple of Australian food since before European settlement. Since people first arrived on the continent they were collecting grains, grinding or pounding them into flour, and baking it in the coals of fires.

When the First Fleet arrived, their basic foods were barrels or salt beef, salt pork, and flour – flour to be baked into bread.

Later on, potatoes became a regular part of the Australian diet, but even then, bread accompanied most meals. And away from regular supply chains, it was always bread or damper as the staple.

It wasn't until the second half of the twentieth century that pasta and rice became important parts of the Australian diet.

Two weeks ago, at our Presbytery's ministers' retreat, every meal included bread: toast at breakfast, bread rolls at lunch and dinner.

While today we do have alternatives to bread, when we stop to think about it, bread is still important.

And certainly, as we read through the scriptures, we find that bread was fundamental to both human life and human society. The first mention of bread is in Genesis 14:18 when King Melchizadek of Salem brought out bread and wine and blessed Abram. Bethlehem comes to us from the Hebrew 'Bet Lehem' – literally 'house of bread'. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he told them to say, 'give us today our daily bread'.

And of course, when Jesus fed the five thousand men plus women and children, he did so with fish and five small loaves of bread – which resulted in twelve baskets of leftover bread.

That was at the beginning of John chapter 6, and then disciples crossed the lake through the storm, and Jesus walked on water to them, and they made it to the other side, where once again the crowd caught up with them – and they asked Jesus, at the opening of our gospel reading "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus' response is "...you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill." People often skip over that verse, but I think it's worth contemplating – Jesus says that the people are wanting him, not because of the signs, but because they ate the loaves. They want Jesus, not because of who he is, but because of what Jesus can do for them.

I think, even today, that people seek Jesus, seek God, because they want to get something: healing or perhaps success. "God, if you just get me out of this scrape, then I'll start going to church, or I'll put a thousand dollars in the offering, or whatever." But that's not a great start to a relationship, is it? It's very transactional – "If you... then I".

That's not to say that food and health aren't important. And certainly, we see Jesus throughout the gospels meeting those needs. We heard a few weeks ago that even when he "could do no miracles" he still healed people (Mark 6:5).

Here in John chapter 6, Jesus tells the people that there's something more, something more important: Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (6:27)

Don't worry about the food. Worry about eternal life. Work for it.

In the church, we're used to these sorts of messages – we've been hearing them for two thousand years or so. But for those people gathered on the shore of the lake, listening to Jesus, this was new.

And I think for many – if not most – people in the world today, this is also a novel idea. The world is transactional "If you... then I". We invite people to church "what's in it for me?" they respond. Why do they need to worry about eternal life, when most people have a pretty good life right now? What do they need to be "saved" from? What do we say?

Jesus tells the crowd that rather than seeking food for today, they should work for food that endures to eternal life.

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (6:28-29)

But the people in the crowd aren't sure. "Give us a sign," they demand, "our ancestors got bread from heaven, what are you going to give us?"

They conveniently ignore what happened just the day before, when Jesus broke five loaves of bread and fed ten thousand plus people with it, and collected twelve baskets of leftovers. That seems both miraculous and memorable to me, but, you know, that was yesterday... what about today? Why don't you do what Moses did?

Moses, of course, was the great hero of the people. He'd brought the people out of slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness to the promised land. But once again, the people's memory wasn't great. As we heard in our Old Testament reading, "The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."" (Exodus 16:3). Just like they would later demand of Jesus, they demanded of Moses "What have you done for us today?"

Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (6:32-33)

Jesus tells them, it wasn’t Moses, but God. Moses didn’t produce manna from heaven, it was God. It wasn’t Moses who rescued them from slavery, it was God. It wasn’t Moses who led them through the wilderness, it was God.

That sounds good, they think. They’d like that bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

“Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.” Do they really expect Jesus to deliver, do you think? They’ve stopped calling him “rabbi” as they did earlier, and now it’s “sir”.

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (6:35)

Jesus is the bread of life. He is the one who created us. Everything that exists was made by him and for him. He is the one who sustains us. Ultimately, only Jesus has the power to hold everything together, both in the universe and in our own lives. Only Jesus, the bread of life, is able to truly satisfy.

We can try all sorts of other things, but only the bread of life will truly give us what we really need. The bread of life, Jesus, who gave himself up for us. We can feast on all the bread and pasta and rice of the world, but without Jesus, there will still be emptiness inside of us. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, tells us how many things he has tried only to find out that they are empty and meaningless. Just in the first chapter we find him asking, “What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?” (Ecc 1:3), saying “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” (Ecc 1:14), and lamenting “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.” (Ecc 1:18)

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” In chapter 19 of John’s gospel, Jesus said “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Only when Jesus is the bread of our lives, can we say along with David, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” He alone can satisfy. He alone can quench the yearning of our souls. We can look for satisfaction in pleasure or riches or the trappings of religion, but we will never find it until we taste of the bread of life.

“I am the bread of life” is the first of the “I am” statements that the gospel of John records. It puts me in mind of the scene in Les Misérables where the outcast Jean Valjean is taken in and given food and shelter by the bishop:

Come in, Sir, for you are weary,  
And the night is cold out there.  
Though our lives are very humble  
What we have, we have to share.  
There is wine here to revive you.  
There is bread to make you strong

It is bread that sustains and strengthens. And Jesus says he is the bread of life.

He goes on to make the other ‘I am’ statements:

'I am the light of the world'  
'I am the door'  
'I am the good shepherd'  
'I am the resurrection and the life'  
'I am the way, the truth and the light'  
And 'I am the true vine'.

Once we accept Jesus as the bread of our lives, we can come know him as our light, our door, our good shepherd, our resurrection, our way, our truth, our life and our true vine.

We live in a complex world. Our society is richer and more diverse than any before. We don't need to rely on bread as our staple. We can have rice and pasta and noodles and polenta and cous cous and corn and any number of other options as our staples – and even when disaster strikes, as we saw four years ago, we needn't go hungry.

But we always need food. We always need 'our daily bread'. Most of all, we always need the bread of life.

As I often say as we celebrate holy communion here, as we eat the symbolic bread, "the body of Christ, broken for you, feed on him in your hearts by grace, with thanksgiving."

Amen