

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 16 August 2009
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Jesus said, "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." Sound familiar?

This is week three of our exploration of Jesus' words about the Bread of Life in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. Just as last week's Gospel began with the last line from the week before, today's Gospel began with the concluding line of last week's Gospel. And next week the Gospel reading will begin with the last three verses of this week's! Obviously this is being driven home for us, to take these words seriously because understanding them in our hearts is key to our lives with God.

Since this is the heart of vacation time it also assures that almost everyone will have the opportunity to think about these ideas, no matter where or when their travels take them away.

Last week we saw Elijah in the wilderness being sustained with food brought to him by a ministering angel, giving him the strength and the courage he needed to carry on God's work when everyone around him had been killed. And this week we hearken back once again to the manna in the wilderness we heard about in Exodus the week before.

It all fits together, and it is all very encouraging, reminding us not to lose heart, not to give up, not to think it all depends on us. Again and again we are reminded in so many ways that God gives us bread, food for the journey.

This is surely part of the wisdom that King Solomon is requesting in his famous prayer to God.

I have always been fascinated by Solomon – and hope one day to write a book drawing together all of the traditions (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and folk traditions) about this remarkable man. He was said to be able to communicate with animals, to be in two places at one time, to travel through time and space like an angel. Whatever the realities of his life, his central distinguishing attribute was wisdom: as he put it, an understanding mind and an ability to discern between good and evil. We all remember stories of his wisdom as a judge. And wisdom is indeed essential to being an effective governor.

But as the epistle says, wisdom is important for the rest of us as well, not only to those entrusted with the powers of government. We need wisdom to survive bad times. In fact we need wisdom for good times also. The epistle tells us that foolishness leads to drunkenness, to self-indulgence, while wisdom turns to God, as Solomon did. Wisdom sees beyond the superficial to the heart of things, sees what God is doing and what God would have us do.

What Jesus was trying to communicate to his contemporaries, and to us through the text of the Gospel, is at the core of the wisdom we are meant to receive and live by. And yet what he was saying was clearly scandalous to the people who did not accept him as God's Anointed, and even scandalous to his followers, many of whom left him because they could not accept what he seemed to be saying. It sounds like cannibalism,

which was repulsive to them and equally repulsive to us. But we do not turn away, because we know that, like most wisdom, the language is symbolic. It is talking about something much deeper and more important than the surface of things.

Christ is calling us away from the creature comforts, from the easy superficial understanding of bread for the journey. Yes, Elijah was fed by angels in the wilderness, so was Jesus, so were the Israelites. The crowds were fed by Jesus himself. But their physical food is not the point. We are called to take time out from thinking about the next meal, from counting on God to give us a granola bar if we forgot our food bag when we set off on our hike.

Can you see Christ standing here, waving his hands in front of our faces, saying, “Hey! Look up from those loaves, that manna! Look here! Look at me! I am the bread you need. I am all you need. In me you will find satisfaction of all your needs. In me you will find the life that is eternal.”

This is God the Son come among us offering us connection to the life of the universe. It is not a question of filling our stomachs, important as that is. This is about being linked to the heart of reality, being part of the spiritual dimension that holds everything in being. This is far beyond simple physical reality. Through Christ we are connected to the fabric of life, to all that lives. This is eternal life.

The food that the angel gave Elijah provided strength to walk through the wilderness to Horeb, but the connection to God gave him the life and courage to continue with his mission, to meet God on the mountain and then return to the people. This was his real bread.

So bread is not just wheat made into loaves or crackers or wafers. Bread means food, means what nourishes us, what makes it possible for us to live. Christ tells us that his flesh is our food and his blood is our drink. This gives us the elements of the Eucharist, but it has meaning far beyond that.

The bread, the body can be seen as the incarnation. Incarnation, enfleshment. God the Son took on human flesh, chose to live a fully human, enfleshed life, sharing our struggles and sorrows and challenges. The reality of God come among us as one of us – that is food for us, that is strength and courage for us, that sustains us and gives us life. Knowing that God has shared and does share all that it means to live a human life makes real our permanent connection with God.

Similarly, the blood can be seen as the crucifixion, Christ’s sacrificial death for us. Our collect spoke of ‘the fruits of [Christ’s] redeeming work’ – that is the blood, the death on our behalf. In the novel *The Shack*, the protagonist, Mack, apologizes to the God figures, says he is sorry that “Jesus had to die.” Papa responds, “I know you are, and thank you. But you need to know that we aren’t sorry at all. It was worth it. Isn’t that right, Son?” and Jesus responds, “Absolutely! And I would have done it even if it were *only* for you, [Mack], but it wasn’t.” (p. 105)

The death at the hands of selfish, violent humans was for us. In that death, God receives all human rejection and violence into himself and transforms it into new life. So the blood, the infinite acceptance of the worst that we humans can do, is our drink. This amazing, infinite love slakes our thirst for acceptance and love.

So the bread and wine bring us the life and death of Jesus, the body and blood of Christ. They bridge the gap between us and God who is the source of all life.

Because we are mortal, physical humans, we, like Elijah, and the Israelites, and Solomon, and the Disciples, are given ways to this enlivening connection with God in physical form – in real bread and real wine – because this is real life and real death.

This connects us to the life of all that is, connects us to all the other inhabitants of our planet, indeed to the whole universe. And this is why we invite all people to the table to share it with us. As we heard in *The Shack*, it isn't only for us. It is for everyone and everyone is welcome. And this is also why when we visit all of the people who are unable to join us for worship because they can no longer leave their homes, or because they are in hospital, or whatever other reason, we take them part of the bread and wine, the body and blood, that we bless together. It is for all of us and it connects us all, to God and to one another.

And this connection is our food and drink, our participation in eternity. It makes a full life possible for us. Wisdom recognizes this, accepts the bread for the journey, the sustenance to do the work God has given us to do.

I invite you to hear again the lines which overlap, which connect the four readings, as a single paragraph:

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."