

I am the Bread of Life

Sermon for Pentecost 10B, 1 August 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78: 22-28; Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6: 24-35

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“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’” (John 6: 35).

At our place we've just enjoyed a terrific British detective drama called 'Paranoid,' streaming on Netflix. The villain is big pharma, covering up failed drug trials that had driven test subjects to acts of psychotic violence. At the evil company's imposing corporate headquarters in Düsseldorf there's a three metre Perspex statue of Jesus in the foyer, arms outstretched like that big Jesus statue set high above Rio de Janeiro. But this outsize transparent Jesus is entirely full of those little red, white and blue capsules. The big pharma company's message couldn't be clearer: our medicine will save you, just like people used to think that Jesus would save you. It's an extraordinary image (see over).



At the heart of this series is Bobby the detective: anxious, sweating, popping pills, and always a whisker away from disaster. But the healing in 'Paranoid' doesn't come through pills, which end up doing more harm than good. It comes through a range of flawed but decent characters trying their best to care and to do the right thing. Chief among them is Lucy, a woman with a past, but who's now a practicing Quaker. Lucy's calm, her attentiveness and her loving

embrace of Bobby succeeds in healing his damaged soul, as well as helping put the whole situation right in the end.

So 'Paranoid' is a notch up on the usual crime drama, not least because Jesus is an absent presence in the series. Bobby the unbeliever honours Jesus in a quite spectacular way, and Lucy the Quaker does so, too, though she claims to have no doctrine. The ones who get Jesus wrong are the big pharma people who think they know better, but who don't.

Friends, today in our readings, and in our Eucharist that sits so closely with today's Gospel, Jesus' true nature is revealed to us and we're called once again to claim our place in his life, his mission. None of this can be reduced to a pill that you can pop to fix life's pain and confusion, to numb depression, to quieten anxiety, to flatten out life's highs and lows. Jesus tells the crowd in today's Gospel something very like this. He tells them that they've come to him simply because they ate their fill of the loaves, but that he's not in the business of just helping people to get by. They fail to grasp that bread in the wilderness was meant as a sign of what would more deeply satisfy their hunger and thirst.

The whole scene of Jesus' feeding people in the wilderness, which last week's Gospel gave us as a leadup to today's so-called bread of

life discourse, was meant to recall how God sustained his people with manna from heaven on their wilderness pilgrimage, which we hear about in today's Exodus reading and psalm. This bread in the wilderness becomes a sign of the true bread from heaven, which is Jesus in person.

But this crowd is theatrically clueless. They ask for a sign and even mention manna in the wilderness, which they remember from Exodus, but they don't link it to what Jesus has just done with his own multiplying of the loaves—a story that's meant to identify Jesus with God himself, calling a new Israel. So, Jesus spells it out for the crowd in another of John's 'I am' sayings. Here Jesus once again uses the Old Testament name that God revealed to Moses in Exodus: 'I am'. So we have 'I am the light of the world;' 'I am the gate;' 'I am the good shepherd;' 'I am the resurrection and the life;' 'I am the way, the truth and the life;' and 'I am the true vine,' while today John's Jesus adds 'I am the bread of life.' Here we meet Israel's God doing a new thing, fulfilling the old, and taking the meaning of bread way beyond the literal.

John's Gospel is full of encounters like this where individuals and groups are being led from incomprehension to faith. Jesus isn't just a magician, or a welfare agency, as the crowd might be thinking in today's Gospel. Nor is he simply a primitive pointer to good modern

products that purport to make life better, as portrayed in 'Paranoid.' The point of our Gospel today is to build faith in Jesus as a deeper answer to human hunger, to human thirst.

But wait, there's more! Our reading from Ephesians today enlists you and me in this divine-human adventure. God's outreach to the world in Jesus, and the world's return to God through Jesus, takes place through the Church, once the whole distorted charade of human misunderstanding and malfeasance has been defeated at Easter—'captivity made a captive' through Jesus Christ, as today's Ephesians reading puts it. And the fruit of this victory that will eventually fill all things is revealed in a gifted, diverse, well ordered, spiritually mature and loving Church that's united in one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

So, friends, Jesus the bread of life doesn't leave us hungry, or thirsty, let alone paranoid; nor does he leave us isolated, divided and resentful. Instead, he summons us into the fellowship of word and sacrament as part of our whole world coming right.

You won't be surprised to hear that this bread of life discourse in John 6 has always brought Christians back to the Eucharist. There's no Eucharist at the last supper in John's Gospel but there is today's teaching about the bread of life. Jesus, who offered bread in the wilderness, explains the deeper truth that he gives himself to us.

Hence our belief that the sacrament isn't just bread but the bread of life, and that it's not just a memorial of Jesus but Jesus himself. But of course we mustn't make a certain sort of über-Catholic mistake and think that the Eucharist works like magic: belief in Jesus is at the heart of it, just as belief in Jesus is at the heart of God's work in today's Gospel—just as growing into the fulness of the Church's identity and maturity is at the heart of it, too, as our Ephesians reading reminds us. And all because—and all because—God cares for every single hungry and thirsty heart, which no ordinary bread can satisfy, and which no pill can fix.

The Lord be with you ...