

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**8<sup>th</sup> August 2021**

**Eglise du Sacré-Cœur, Oppède**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

We have come in on the middle of a conversation. Our Gospel reading today is the middle one of three in a row taken from St John's Gospel, on the theme of Jesus as the Bread of Life. The whole passage comes just after the feeding of the five thousand, when the crowd who were following Jesus around the shores of Lake Galilee had experienced a satisfying of their physical hunger and were hungry for more.

Jesus challenges his hearers to look beyond their immediate needs, to develop an attitude of mind and heart that will help them deal with whatever life brings. 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures for eternal life.' But they challenge him back, and in today's passage begin to do so more stridently, particularly that group whom the Gospel writer refers to as 'the Jews'. (It must, always, be emphasised that this does not mean Jewish people generally, but a particular section of the religious leadership of Jesus's time who questioned his authority.) Still focussed on the question of food, his hearers compare their present experience with that of their ancestors receiving manna from heaven as they wandered in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses – 'What are *you* going to do?', they ask. 'Show us a sign and we will believe you.'

Jesus says to them: 'It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven'. The past tense becomes present as Jesus's true significance is revealed. Then he says the words: 'I am the bread of life.'

It is the first of seven sayings in the Fourth Gospel that begin with the words 'I am'. 'I AM' in the Old Testament was the name given to God himself. The Gospel writer is saying: this is it, there is nowhere further to look, it is the end of all our desiring. All our hopes and fears are met in this. The mysterious presence of God, which is all we need. The Father sending the Son so that humanity may experience the fullness of God. Christ the bread of life, the true manna, is the ultimate provision for us in life and in death. God in Christ is the comfort we need to walk in faithfulness through our earthly lives, and also the gift that promises eternal life with God. The Holy Spirit provides the power for us to glimpse and grasp these things in faith, and share them with others.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches his hearers that the feeding of five thousand was temporary, but what he is offering is permanent. A spiritual awareness that can help us feel differently about how we live. A life where fear of scarcity turns into a sense of abundance.

'What are *you* going to do?' they ask. The enormity of the answer is pointed to and end of our Gospel reading: 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' There are two references in those words, both of which are central to our faith.

One is a reference to the crucifixion, the self-giving, self-sacrificing love that lies at the heart of the mystery of what Christ did. The mystery of a God emptied of power, dying as a criminal on an instrument of torture. A place of shame, of utter desolation. Christ's words assure us we are dealing with a God who has known the worst that humanity can suffer and is with us in it, never leaving us alone. Transforming our humanity while restoring our relationship with the divine.

The other reference is to the gift Christ gave to humanity on the night he was betrayed - the institution of the Eucharist, when he took the simple elements of bread and wine, blessed them, broke them and poured them, and shared them with his friends. He told them they were his body and blood. And he asked them to do this in remembrance of him.

'Was ever another command so obeyed?', wrote the Benedictine monk Dom Gregory Dix. 'For century after century, ... this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it ... People have found no better thing than this to do for monarchs at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; ... for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; ... while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; ... one could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.'

The fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving is, if we pause to think about it, a metaphor for what it means to love. In order to love we must first learn what it is to *be* loved – to be taken and to be blessed. We must also learn what it means to become vulnerable – to allow ourselves to be broken. It is only then that our lives can be truly shared with others.

Let us consider the word ‘remember’. As well as calling to mind through memory, that most precious of human gifts which helps us make sense of who we are, it has another meaning – the opposite of ‘dismember’. Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster, published a book of reflections called *Pray, Love, Remember*, in which he wrote this:

‘To be re-membered is our destiny. In the end that is our end, our purpose: that is why we are here. Like the penitent thief who says: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, our prayer is: “Lord, re-member me, refashion me, so that I may share the life of your Kingdom. Remake my life in the shape of your own.” And his answer? “If you would truly remember me, if you would bring me out of the past into your present, then do this with bread and wine.” And in our imagination we watch him as he takes bread ... and ... says (by implication): “This is me. This is the pattern of my life. You are now to re-member me, that is to say, to be my body in the world, your lives offered to God, your lives lived thankfully, your lives broken and shared in the costly service of others.” ... We are presenting, in these four acts of taking, thanking, breaking and sharing, the proper pattern and shape for all human life.’

'It's why we are here' today. For as Dix writes, 'best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom,' people have done this.

I would like to add one more example to Dom Gregory Dix's list. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of being invited to visit Malcolm Dodd in his care home and take a service of Holy Communion to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination as a priest. Malcolm was frail, his dementia progressing, but he was dressed in his alb and he sat beside me as I read the words he had first used fifty years earlier. When we got to the moment in the Eucharistic prayer when the priest repeats Christ's words of institution – 'This is my body, given for you', I thought I heard a whisper beside me, but I wasn't sure. I continued, saying the words which follow – 'This is my blood...' This time it was unmistakable. Malcolm was saying the words with me. He was concelebrating. The one whose own memory was slipping away said, clearly and firmly, for everyone to hear: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' 'Was ever another command so obeyed?'

Jesus said: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

Amen.