

SERMON for Pentecost 11 - August 4th, 2024.

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

It is lovely to be 'officially' back from my Long Service Leave!

Whilst reflecting on today's readings through the week, I was reminded of one of the 'gifts' I was given last year, at the InterProvincial Franciscan Chapter meeting I attended. That was from Brazilian Bible Scholar, Paulo Ueti, who encouraged us to be certain of who this Jesus we followed was. Do we really know who we claim to follow?

As I was pondering during the week, I felt challenged by some questions:

Who do I say Jesus is?

What draws me to follow Jesus?

What must I do?

What are the consequences of my choices/my decisions?

... and so on.

What draws you to follow Jesus?

At the moment we are in the middle of a number of readings which talk about bread, specifically Jesus as the bread of life.

Last week we heard the story of Jesus' feeding of five thousand and today we hear the consequences of that event. The crowds continue to follow Jesus, but their reasons have changed. No longer are they following him to hear his teaching, no longer is it so much about bringing the ill for healing; there is a certain element amongst the crowd who had eaten their miraculous fill, and were now following him for a free feed.

²⁶Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." [John 6:26-27]

Jesus encourages them to look beyond their physical need to grasp that which is deeper, that which gives eternal nourishment of the spirit - repent and believe the good news, receive the knowledge of what God is really like, and know that there is nothing we can do to earn our way to God, but that God loves us and calls us into a life of love and service to God, love and service to those around us.

What must we do?

Jesus' response is arguably simple:

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." [John 6: 29]

So simple, or is it? The work we are called to is to believe in the one God sent, to believe in Jesus.

For me this brings echoes of the lovely piece from the prophet Micah 6:8:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? [Micah 6:8]

Paul writes of the consequences in the lives of those who attempt to live such a life.

¹I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [Ephesians 4: 1-3]

Then, a passage that has gone straight into our baptism service:

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." [Ephesians 4:4-6]

The consequence of the life of a baptized believer, is that each of us is given “grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift”. In other words, each of us, unique and precious in God’s sight, is blessed with our own unique gifts and talents which we are called to use for the building up of God’s people, to be offered in the service of God and community selflessly.

Unfortunately, behind much of the dysfunction of today’s readings lies the sin of selfishness. In the feeding of the 5000 last week we heard of a young boy’s selfless giving of all he had: five barley loaves and two small fish.

‘It is that wholeness of genuinely human life, both in private and public, which Paul describes in his letter to the Ephesians. Each one of us is given a gift, but the gifts together make up the single body of Christ. Selfishness on the part of the individual brings dysfunction in the community; whereas personal holiness (which includes gentleness and humility) leads to the building up and unity within the community.

It doesn’t take a Rhodes scholar to work out that the dysfunction in our community, in society as a whole, has not in some significant part been as a result of the sin of selfishness of the individuals which make up the society. Unfortunately this also includes the Church as well as society generally.¹ Very few of us are like the young boy from the feeding of the five thousand, who holds nothing back, but offers his all to Jesus.

We all hold something back from God, perhaps it is only a little, but I think most of us hold quite a bit back, perhaps it is out of fear, perhaps out of thinking we need a balance in our lives or maybe we feel if we hand over everything to God we will lose control of our lives, perhaps, though we hardly dare even admit it to ourselves, we are really not that into God? What ever our reasons, our community is just a little poorer when we fail to be a community which totally reflects the renewing and transforming love of God.

‘All this, of course, needs faith. The crowd who experienced, or heard about, the feeding of the five thousand were left a little dazed and confused by the experience and wanted more. Jesus challenges the puzzled crowd to see through the physical loaves to the true bread beyond.¹ Don’t get hung up on the abundance of food for the body, rather listen to what Jesus has to say and live lives which reflect his teaching. While Jesus doesn’t dismiss the need for physical food (after all, he fed the multitude!), there is a need to feed our spirits as well as live lives which reflect the place Jesus plays in our life.

Paul’s letter calls us to a unity in which we all contribute to the wholeness of our community. ‘In our unity, we are still different and our differentness is a blessing. We all have something to contribute, and we must recognize and accept our differences. We need to hear what Paul is saying. We need to absorb this message. We need to accept others who are not like us, people who have strengths and weaknesses that we don’t have. And, harder still, we need to accept our own differentness. We need to truly value what God has made us, what God is still making us, and not wish we were someone else with skills and talents that we envy.’²

We all live the consequences of the choices we make.

What are the consequences of the decisions we have made and how can we all learn to trust that we can selflessly give God our all ... and watch some completely different consequences take shape!

Jesus said “I am the bread of life”, let us confidently feed on Christ to make us whole. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. Loosely based on: NT Wright; *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings - Year B*; SPCK; London; pages 92-93.
2. based on a sermon posted by Dawn Clarke on *midrash* on 02.08.09.