

I am the Bread of life

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, 4 August 2024

2 Samuel 11: 26–12: 13a; Psalm 51: 1–12; Ephesians 4: 1–16; John 6: 24–35

What do you hunger for? I ask the question metaphorically, not biologically. We all have a basic need to satisfy physical hunger, but we have a far greater need to satisfy our spiritual hunger. Spiritual hunger affects our whole being. It affects our spirit, our heart, our emotions. When satisfied we are at peace, when not satisfied, we are ill at ease, disturbed, on edge.

What is it that you hunger for?

This is the question that Jesus addressed in our Gospel reading today. The events that John describes came just after Jesus' great miracle of feeding the five thousand with a little boy's lunch. On that occasion, the crowds had their physical hunger satisfied with barley bread and fish, but they soon became hungry again.

Nevertheless, the miracle astounded them, and they pursued Jesus. John tells us in the passage immediately before today's Gospel that after the feeding of the five thousand the crowd had wanted to take Jesus by force to make him king and so he withdrew by himself into the mountain and the disciples went home in their boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee where the miracle had taken place.

If Jesus could feed five thousand people with a small boy's lunch, surely he was the ideal king to satisfy the fiscal needs of the people. You can imagine the political fervour the people must have had. Perhaps they were seeing in Jesus the solution to the much-hated occupation of their homeland by the Romans. But Jesus knew that he had come into the world not for fiscal purposes, not for political purposes, but for a spiritual purpose. He knew that the real need of the people was not bread and fish. Their true need was far deeper than daily food, their true need had eternal consequences.

When the crowd finally caught up with Jesus, Jesus said to 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. Do 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 could see right through the people. They had missed the point of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. They should have recognised that only God could do such an amazing thing. They should have been seeking the fulfilment that only God can give rather than more food to fill their stomachs. This is why Jesus said, “don't work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life”.

One of my favourite quotes from Mother Teresa of Calcutta is from a speech she made to the United States senate. She said, ‘We in Calcutta are fiscally poor but spiritually rich, and you in the west are fiscally rich but spiritually poor, and your poverty is far harder to address than ours.’

The people said to Jesus, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ (verse 28). Again, they missed the point. They thought that they could win God’s favour through good works, or political action. Jesus put them straight. ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ (verse 29)

As good Jews they wanted some way to work to gain God’s favour, but the Lord pointed them to faith and grace—to believe in the one he has sent. The only spiritual work that pleases God is to allow him to work in us through the Holy Spirit in response to our faith in him. To do the work of God, we must put our faith in God and in Jesus whom he sent. But the crowd still did not understand what Jesus was saying. As if they had instantly forgotten that amazing sign Jesus had just performed in feeding the five thousand, they asked him for a sign!

What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’

You will recall that when the people of Israel were travelling through the desert from Egypt to the promised land, God had provided them manna (which they saw as heavenly food) for them to eat – each day, just enough for that day.

Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ (John 6: 30–34)

Finally, the penny dropped. Bread that gives life to the world far surpasses any physical food that satisfies physical hunger. Jesus then said, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

In the most wonderful of metaphors, Jesus declares himself to be the bread of life. It is when we feed on him that our true spiritual hunger is satisfied.

‘What does it mean to feed on Jesus?’ I hear you ask. The deeper meaning of this has several theological perspectives:

Spiritual Nourishment. Feeding on Jesus symbolises our need for spiritual sustenance that comes from a deep relationship with Jesus. Just as food sustains physical life, Jesus sustains spiritual life.

Eucharistic understanding. There is also a close relationship to the Eucharist. When we partake in the bread and wine, which are sacraments (or signs) of the body and blood of Christ, we spiritually receive grace and spiritual communion with Jesus, feeding on him in our heart.

Faith and belief. Feeding on Jesus can also be understood as an act of faith and belief in His sacrifice and teachings. It signifies trusting in Jesus for salvation and relying on His words and promises.

Union with Christ. To feed on Christ as the bread of life conveys the intimate union between us and Jesus. It reflects the idea of abiding in Christ and having His life and teachings become an integral part of our life.

‘Feeding on Jesus’ is a rich, multifaceted concept that encapsulates the essence of our Christian faith, emphasising the necessity of a close, sustaining relationship with Jesus for spiritual life and growth.

‘Lord, give us this bread always.’

Amen.