

Our gospel reading comes from John Chapter 6 which is a chapter which says much on the subject of bread. I was a bit worried that the significance of much of this might get lost on our congregation here at St. James.

Let me tell you where this worry comes from. It goes back to the first reception we ever had for the parish at the rectory. We did what we always did in London. We cooked a variety of dishes and put out a couple of dishes of French bread that we cut up. At the end of the evening, we tidied up, cleared away the plates. We noticed that no one had touched any of the bread that we'd put out. We thought that's odd. We didn't know why. We do now. Bread is a carbohydrate, and carbohydrates are the Great Satan of life in La Jolla, to be avoided at all costs.

I was recently told that offering someone in La Jolla a piece of bread is like offering them a cigarette in a different context. La Jollans simply don't love their bread in the way the French do. Or, in fact, any other cultures that you might mention in the world. All over the world, bread is a staple, takes many different forms: baguettes, pizza, naan, challa, matzo, tortilla, pandoche, focaccia, white pre-sliced.

You might say that bread is a kind of universal language, and that's what Jesus is drawing on here when he invites people to pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." He's not simply suggesting that we ask politely that God might give us toast for breakfast. He means what we need, the sustenance that we need, we're asking God to provide.

I'm told that after the Second World War, the allies found in Europe lots of orphans who were starving and scared. They were gathered together in camps. They were well cared for, but they were very unsettled. A psychologist came and visited, and said what you need to do to help these children settle is to give them a piece of bread at night, so before they went to bed, they were given bread, not to eat, but just to hold onto as they fell to sleep, and it worked because they knew they're wake up in the morning, and there'd be something to eat, that they'd be fed, that their needs would be provided for.

That's the kind of imagery that Jesus is drawing on here. In this chapter, he says lots about bread. It ends with Jesus making that extraordinary statement. "I am the bread of life," he says. This conversation that's part of

our gospel reading begins after Jesus has fed the 5,000. You might remember, there's that story of Jesus teaching the crowds, a crowd of over 5,000. They were there all day. They got hungry and they had no food, so Jesus took all that they had, two fish and five small loaves of bread, and he managed to feed the huge crowd just with those beginnings.

The reading that we've just heard, the Gospel reading, starts the next day. It's the day after that miracle of 5000 being fed. Some of the crowd have gone looking for Jesus, and they find him on the other side of the sea in Capernaum. Then what we have in the heart of the Gospel reading is a dialogue. It's a kind of conversation. It's not a normal conversation because the people in the crowd and Jesus, they talk to each other, but they talk at cross purposes. There's no real engagement going on, which is typical of the kind of conversation that we find throughout John's Gospel.

We can see the problem from the start. The conversation begins with the people who find Jesus asking a simple, straightforward question, Rabbi, when did you come here? It's not a yes or no answer, but it's not difficult. There's a limited range of answers, either last evening, or first thing this morning, but Jesus doesn't say such a thing.

In response to that question, he starts to talk about why he thinks that they've come to find him, and so it goes on. They talk past each other. The people are talking about material, physical bread, and they refer to that story from the Old Testament we heard where the people of Israel were in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and they ran out of food, and God provided the manna for them, the bread that they collected every morning to keep them going, the bread from Heaven to eat, but Jesus isn't talking about that kind of bread. He's talking about spiritual bread, something different, spiritual food and nourishment, food, he says, that endures for eternal life.

Whilst the people don't quite understand what Jesus is saying, at least they're intrigued. They say sir, give us this bread always. It's in response to that question that Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

When Jesus fed the 5,000, the people had their stomachs filled, and they'd witnessed an amazing miracle, and they'd sought Jesus out because they wanted more, more of the same, but Jesus invites them

to go deeper. He wants them to see that there is more to life than material things. Remember what he says in the temptations, in response to the devil. Man shall not live by bread alone. There was more, much more, more to Jesus' ministry that miracles, even those on the scale of the feeding of 5,000 people. That miracle wasn't an end in itself. It was a sign. Jesus talks of it here as a sign.

Jesus knew that he wasn't going to save the world through his miracles, a storm calmed here, a crowd fed there. Rather, it was going to be saved through the means of a deeper, darker mystery that involved his death on a cross and his resurrection. Jesus didn't come to use his hands to miraculously make bread. He came so that those hands might be nailed by an executioner to a cross, so that his body could be broken for the salvation of the world.

The crowd was seeking material bread, the kind you get from a baker. Jesus was offering them spiritual bread, food that endures for eternal life, food that only God can provide, the only food that satisfies our spiritual hunger. Jesus would say to us the same as he said to that crowd. Don't be satisfied with having your stomachs filled, seek spiritual food, food that endures. Seek spiritual satisfaction. Come to me and never be hungry, he says.

How many of us are spiritually hungry? How many of us want to go deeper into a relationship with God, at least one. But, I've delegated our ministry to dogs to Mother Rebecca, so that's one for you to pick up.

Remember what Jesus says in The Beatitudes. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled." How are we filled? How do we satisfy that spiritual hunger that at least one dog amongst us feels?

Let me close with two suggestions. Both come from the passage. The first is this. Believe, there's a message of grace embedded in this story. The crowd asked a question which still gets asked today. They say, what must we do to perform the works of God. What must we do? We all want to do the right thing. If only following Jesus was as simple as just following an ABC, certain rituals. It's not like that.

See how Jesus answers. "This is the work of God that you believe in whom he has sent." There's nothing we can do to satisfy a deep spiritual hunger and longing.

The God-shaped hole each of us has in our souls can only be filled by believing in the God made known in Jesus Christ. It's not a doing. It's about receiving, receiving the gift of faith and grace and belief that God offers in Jesus Christ.

The second way we might begin to satisfy our spiritual hunger is in this communion service, by receiving regularly the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In this communion service, we talk in a very real way, as Jesus invites us to, of feeding on him who is the bread of life. We'll soon be hearing again those words of Jesus' invitation after he broke bread at the last supper. Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you. Later in this chapter of John 6, Jesus says, "I am the living bread which came down from Heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live forever and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

As we come forward later to receive communion, to take once more the bread and the wine, something deep and mysterious is going on. We have the privilege of sharing the living bread which gives life to all people and can satisfy our spiritual hunger.

Amen.