

Ninth Sunday after Trinity, Proper 13, Year B, 1 August 2021
based on a Bible essay on John 6.1-15 by Father Georg Sporschill, SJ

This morning I want to share with you a Bible essay written in German for last Sunday's *Lebenskunst*, an Austrian Sunday morning religious radio programme. *Lebenskunst* can loosely be translated as "The Art of Living!" I want to share this essay for a number of reasons. Last Sunday we kept the Feast of St James the Apostle, so missed out on hearing John's account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Over the coming weeks we will be hearing passages from Jesus' exposition of the Feeding of the Five Thousand as found in John's gospel including today's words "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) Another reason is that the author of the Bible essay Georg Sporschill is a respected Austrian. He is a Jesuit priest famous for his work with the street children of Romania. In the past Christ Church through its charitable giving, its sharing, has supported his charity *Concordia* meaning with heart, with passion. This piece also speaks about friendship, which to my mind is central to Camus' novel *The Plague*, which we read in the CCV reading group. Here a few sentences. "After all, it's silly to live only in the plague. Of course a man should fight for the victims of the plague. But if he ceases to love anything else, then what is the point of fighting?" And then a page on rounding off the dialogue and after a mutual swim "Once they dressed they left without saying a word. But their hearts were one, and the memory of the night was forever with them." (pp. 299f, Penguin Books) Furthermore friendship was mentioned in one of the readings at Morning Prayer during the week, "Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God." (James 2.23) Friendship

is a central concept in St John's Gospel. You might remember these words? "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends." (John 15.15) Finally I want to share it with you best summed up by a friend who checked my English translation... "The essay is inspiring and gives the impression of being totally authentic. A remarkable person." And I would add Christian.

"Thirty years ago three young friends and I arrived in Bucharest. Our assignment was to help the street children from the infamous Ceaușescu homes who having been abandoned and left to their own devices poured by the thousands into the streets of Romania after the tearing down of the Iron Curtain.

(Sharing)

We went to Gara de Nord, the north train station. In our bags we dragged aid supplies such as pullovers, chocolate, and apples. I had learnt a few words of Romanian on the way. In this grim area of town we were immediately recognisable as foreigners. Our first explorations of the sewers where the children had found shelter was dangerous. Immediately begging children surrounded us. Our donations instantly dried up. That's when the little paint sniffers became aggressive. We fled with empty hands. Had our beautiful dreams of helping just imploded? We were saved from the desperate horde by Ivan. He was a head taller than the rest and screamed at them. He indicated that we should flee. He was the only one to run after us. In a conspiratorial whisper he claimed to be our saviour - and did we have anything for him?

(The wonder of the multiplication of loaves and the wonder of friendship)

That's how it is when you want to help. Those who are hungry aren't nice. They fight. What you are able to give is like a drop in the ocean. Jesus of Nazareth encounters hungry people when he dares to cross over to the other side of Lake Tiberias entering the alien country of the so-called pagans. A large crowd follows him, because the people have experienced his power to heal. What does Jesus do? He sits down on the grass and explains to his disciples how helping works. Very practical. One of them, Philip, doubts the possibilities. How can we with the little money we possess feed so many? However another disciple, Andrew, has an eye for the solution. He points to a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. With the little that is in the child's bag Jesus performs a miracle. Five thousand families are fed and there's lots left over. Twelve baskets full.

So much that out of it grew a soup kitchen for street children. Ivan became our first co-worker in Bucharest. To this day we have remained friends. At 75 I ask myself, What is the secret of social work? It's not the success, but the relationships you are given. With children, with people that want to help. The joy is that you are borne up and become aware of surprising energies despite the overwhelming demands that always accompany you. The secret lies in the eyes of the disciple who sees the boy, who indeed had very little but was willing to share it. For me it was Ivan, a street child who helped us. Thanks to him I found an exciting, life-fulfilling project and wonderful friends. This is how I experience the multiplication of loaves."

(Translated by the Revd Canon Patrick Curran, 26.07.21)

The God who made himself known to Abraham, who has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ, is alive continuing to inspire men and women the world over to follow often at great cost to themselves seen from a solely worldly perspective, but who become lights in our generation. The multiplication of loaves still occurs when we have the humility, the good sense to call on the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to guide, direct and inspire having eyes ready to see and hearts ready to share: finding where to look and then to act. What is made known in history through the person of Jesus Christ can be assigned to the history books or it can be our present experience as we seek to follow in his footsteps on our pilgrimage calling on his name. It is in persons and initiatives like those of Georg Sporschill, who is a shining example, and the everyday acts of so-called "ordinary" Christians at work, at play, at home, in relationships, in communities, that the authenticity of the Christian faith is first lived and then seen. I am reminded of words by St Thomas who speaks of his need to see with his own eyes, which is the call of many millions today. Thomas said to the believers, the disciples, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20.25b) You and I may be no Georg Sporschill and that's okay, but we are called to be friends of God and labourers in the vineyard. The call to be a disciple, to be a Christian, is a call to friendship with God, the God who satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst that the world might believe, that our partner may believe, that our spouse may believe, that our children may believe, that our colleagues may believe, that our friends might believe ... that we may believe... and believing find that life of which Jesus speaks. I end with the words of St Thomas who sums up the cry of today's generation, "Unless I see, I will not believe!" May

we as individuals and as a church not be a hindrance to seeing, but help people to see that the bread of life has come, that there is indeed more than enough for all and more. Twelve baskets full.

End