

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity, 4 August 2024, Year B, Proper 13,
Readings: Exodus 16.2-4, 9-15, Psalm 78.23-29, Ephesians 4.1-16, John 6.24-35

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

What is bread? How would you define bread if asked? An entry from an online dictionary states simply bread is 'food made of flour, water, and yeast mixed together and baked'. And then we have to ask, What is flour or indeed yeast? The definition of flour from the same source 'a powder obtained by grinding grain, typically wheat, and used to make bread, cakes, and pastry'. Finally, what are grains also called cereals? Grains are the harvested seeds of grasses such as wheat, corn, barley and rye.

Quickly we have arrived at a place where we are reminded of a theme I was peppering my sermons with before going on summer leave, namely that of one of our first vocations as humans made in the image of God is to till and to keep God's creation as stated in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. A vocation, a calling I note given prior to what is known as The Fall. In Genesis 2:15 we read, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."

Supposedly humans first started to collect wild grasses and their grains to eat over 100,000 years ago. The growing of crops, domestication, did not occur until later. The earliest evidence of small-scale cultivation of edible grasses is from around 23,000 years ago with the Ohalo II people and their settlement on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Almost half of the grains grown around the world are harvested for people to eat directly. Humans worldwide receive an average of 48 percent of their calories, or food energy, from grains. The 2022 hit list for grains worldwide is wheat, maize, rice, barley, sorghum, oats, and rye.

As intimated above a lot has to happen before we can enjoy a slice of bread. In order to have a slice of bread there a number of processes, cultural techniques required. You need to till the soil, plant the seeds, already gathered, water them after planting and then when the time has come

harvest. You need to sift the grain from the chaff. Having sifted you need to grind the seeds into flour followed by mixing the flour won with yeast and water as well as kneading the dough. You need to light a fire. You need to bake the dough and only then can you enjoy bread an essential and everyday source of energy, nutrition. As an addendum in Egypt since at least Pharaonic times people would put their dough outside of their homes for the sun to bake the bread - a technique still used today. It gave me great delight when I first saw this technique being used.

It is no wonder that Jesus **includes** in the prayer he gives his disciples, who have asked him, their Master, that he might teach them how to pray, the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread". Going through my parents' flat after my mother's passing I came across a hand carved wooden platter on which she would place the sliced bread for Sunday morning breakfast, which I hadn't seen in years. Sunday breakfast with a decked table was a more formal affair than is the custom today in many households. Yes, we ate Sunday breakfast together. The inscription around the wooden platter reads, 'Gib us heute unser täglich Brot.' I have a vague memory that this platter was carved by a family member who was held as a prisoner of war during World War II, where you are at the mercy of your captors. German soldiers definitely had a preference to be taken prisoner by the British or the Americans.

In today's Gospel Jesus says of himself I, Jesus, am the Bread of Life. The point Jesus is making is he is the source of life and it is he who provides what is needed for life, as is made clear in the feeding of the five thousand out of which this discourse in John's gospel arises and which we began to consider last week. Jesus is making it very clear, if you want to have life in fullness you need to come to me and be fed by me. You need to be in relationship with me. Life in fullness is with Jesus and not apart from him despite what many say. This is not a take it or leave it statement. He is the bread of life. He is what he says he is. He is truthful.

One commentator, Katherine M. Lewis, in her commentary on John's gospel (page 84) makes an important point, "... Jesus as the Bread of life, first and foremost ... must be grounded in bread as a necessity for sustenance as a human being." She adds that this necessity must first be affirmed,

'before rendering its interpretation through the lens of the Old Testament or Eucharistic liturgical practices.' So let us affirm with her that Jesus is the sustenance, the true and living bread, needed for everyday living.

As you can already surmise, I wholeheartedly agree with Lewis's statement and wanted to hear more for her on this, but there wasn't more, but she helpfully links the point of Jesus being the bread, as is necessary to sustain life for humans at the most basic level of our existence, to the overall thrust (theological purpose) of John's gospel, namely the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God became like you and me. He who is God made himself in the image of God, and dwelt among us. The incarnation.

We need food real food to live. We need water, clean water, to live. Peter Klingenberg thoughtfully has been reminding everyone to drink enough water. A week ago Alexander, my son-in-law, and I cycled to Zwentendorf and back in one day, the longest bike ride of my life, and were acutely aware that we needed to drink enough water throughout a hot day. Assisted by an app we located places to fill up our water bottles along the way. The following day we hiked along the Bahnwanderweg from Semmering to Payerbach/Reichenau, I have the hematoma (runners' toe in my case plural) to prove it. On that occasion a hotter day we did run out of water and our forward movement was impaired and our app informed us that there was nowhere to fill up our water bottles. When people are thirsty, with little access to clean water, let alone running water their lives are impaired. In the German costal Baltic town where I went to high school there were in 1969 and many years thereafter signs on Pensionen (guesthouses) along the Strandallee advertising offers of accommodation. The signs said "rooms with running hot water". I often think of this when walking through villages today outside Vienna.

My intuition as a Christian leads me to take the material, this physical aspect of our existence, which Lewis stresses – to take this aspect of our lives seriously. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are to glorify God in our bodies, as Paul writes (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). And to affirm this

physical aspect before we wander off into the spiritual meanings of things means that Jesus is close to every aspect of our lives. Matter matters and it matters absolutely. It is central.

Moving on a little I was a wee bit excited when a little book written in Croatian by Predag Matvejević was published in English in 2020 entitled *Our Daily Bread*. The title caught my eye, but it was the subtitle that piqued my interest by catering to another intuition of mine addressing Lewis' point that if Jesus is The Bread of Life, as he says he is, "God becoming human requires that at every turn the incarnation is fully present." The subtitle of *Our Daily Bread* is, 'A meditation on the cultural and symbolic significance of bread throughout history'. When you exchange one word in the subtitle namely *bread* with Jesus, who is the Bread of Life, we see that there is nothing outside of Jesus' coming amongst us that remains unaffected. How can it be otherwise through him, in him and with him things take on a new meaning and value? As Paul will write, "... test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5.21,22)

As Christians we know that Jesus, the Bread of life, the Word made flesh, impacts on each and every moment of time from the beginning to the end. In the same way his coming amongst us in our humanity impacts on each and every decision we make, how we live to lives, the things we are ready to affirm and the things that we must reject, say no to and stand up for. Our faith is not a candy store in which we can pick and choose by ignoring or setting aside this and that when convenient. It is the source of life in the here and now.

I end today's musings with the promise Jesus makes after claiming "I am the bread of life". He follows up with the promise that should reassure and empower us by his grace, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Yes, this we believe, Lord Jesus, help our unbelief. **Amen.**