

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

Sunday 5 August, Pentecost 10

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

John 6: 24-35,

Psalm 51: 1-3, 9-12

Ephesians 4:1-16



“I am the Bread of life”

At the worship committee meeting last Thursday we spoke about communion. We talked about what it means to celebrate communion and which aspects of the ritual are important to us and why. It was a good discussion. Intense, charged with emotion, by people who were willing to listen to each other and make themselves vulnerable. It left me feeling grateful, touched and nurtured by the sincerity and dedication of others to their faith.

There were as many different perspectives around the table as there were people, a broadness of background and history that represented, to a certain extent, the broadness and background of this congregation. In an age of individualism we are more aware than ever of how different we all are, how unique our lives and histories, our personal characteristics, our genetic make-up, the environments we live in and interact with on a daily basis and how all these things come into play in whatever we do, think or say.

Each and every one of us has travelled a different path to Church, to communion, some more similar than others, but each and every one unique to the person we are and that determines what we are looking for and how we evaluate what happens in the service.

150 odd different perspectives, different needs, different longings, different histories, different traditions, different understandings of what faith is, what worship should be and why we come to communion and what we expect to gain from it.

Just take a few minutes to remember where you have come from. What worship is for you, what you expect to gain from it, what is important for you, and what you could do without.

And now do the same for communion. How does it work best for you? Do you know why? What do you long for? Do you feel your needs are met? Or not? Why not?

The gospel of John does not have an account of the last supper. It is thought that instead John told the story of the feeding of the five thousand followed by the discourse about Jesus being the bread of life we read this morning.

Scholars agree the account of the last supper as we find it in the first letter to the Corinthians and in the three synoptic gospels is possibly one of the most ancient chunks of New Testament scripture we have, and that the words recorded as being spoken by Jesus at the last supper may well be the oldest account of any words of Jesus we possess.

Nothing is ever certain in biblical scholarship, but it is assumed that the fact that these words reoccur with slight variations in multiple sources shows that they were important words from the very beginning of Christianity. Words that were repeated every time Christians gathered to break bread and drink wine in a worship setting, first as part of a more elaborate meal, later as a separate ritual.

The words we find in 1 Corinthians 11 are probably the oldest version of the story of the last supper we have. I have translated them closer to the Greek than our translations do for use in the prayer of thanksgiving this morning. This is what they say:

**on the night before he died,
he took bread, blessed and broke it
and said: This is me, my body, for you, do this to remember
me.**

**In the same way the wine, after supper, saying: This wine is the
new covenant for the sake of my blood, do this, whenever you
drink it, to remember me.**

To remember. That is the goal, the aim that is set. Nothing more, nothing less. When we break bread and pour the wine in community, as Jesus' followers, we remember how Jesus broke bread and poured wine with his friends on one particular occasion. Like every Jewish host, Jesus must have blessed and broken the bread whenever he shared a meal with his disciples. People didn't slice or cut bread, they broke it. They ate it on its own, or with oil, salt, dried meat or fish, soup or stew, depending on the time of day and their affluence. With wine. Wine is what people drank at every meal if they could half afford it at the time, diluted with water, with quality and quantity of wine depending on what they could afford and the occasion was.

What Jesus asks his friends to remember is how he shared an ordinary meal with them on an extraordinary night. They must have seen him break bread and say the blessing over it many, many times. But this time he adds something to the blessing that would have disconcerted them and should disconcert us: "This is me, for you". Jesus is about to be broken like a loaf of bread, and he indicates that this breaking is for his friends. That it is something to be remembered.

And similar with the wine. "For the sake of my blood, a new covenant". Pointing to his blood that will be spilled the next day Jesus indicates this blood will not be spilled for nothing. That a new covenant, a new understanding with God will emerge because of it.

Jesus' body will be broken, but like bread when it is broken nurtures more than when it is in one piece, Jesus' broken body will be of more value to his followers after it is broken than when it was in one piece.

Jesus' blood will be spilled, but it will not be another good life gone to waste, instead it will make it possible for people to enter into a different understanding with God than was possible before.

What John understood when he decided not to include this part of the story and these words in his gospel, is that there is more to this than “just” repeating the actions and the words. That there was more to it than “just” remembering Jesus had died the way he did. That there was more to it than that.

John has Jesus ferrying back and forth across the sea, walking across the place where the people of his day believed the gates of hell were located and calming it without so much as a word. The forces of death lurking underneath have no power over him. He feeds people like God fed the people at the time of Moses. He embodies the essence of what a life created in God’s image might look like.

“I am”, words that will be repeated six more times in John each identifying Jesus with the “I am” that appeared to Moses in the burning bush. I am the bread of life. And that’s where our brains should start to crunch. Understanding that broken bread is able to feed more people than one loaf and that the breaking of Jesus’ body was the beginning of something new is easy compared to the mental gymnastics John wants us to perform at a more metaphorical level.

Believing that in Jesus the “I am” people already knew from the First testament was speaking is one thing. But understanding what “bread of Life” exactly is, is something else altogether. Remember the levels of understanding we talked about last week and the week before? Perhaps it will help us if we apply that principle to these words as well. Let’s try to move from surface to deeper understanding.

Bread - is a staple food, one of the essential foods that everyone was eating for their nurture. It would have been unimaginable for someone to survive without it in Jesus’ day and time. What Jesus has to offer is bread, staple food, essential for survival in the world. Jesus and his teaching are bread - to be identified with the five loaves he’s just fed a multitude with. Jesus is the law embodied.

Bread - the more it is broken the more it will feed. The breaking of Jesus paradoxically brings more nurture to his people, not less. Bread - when your soul is looking for nurture from "I am" look no further, that nurture has become available in Jesus.

Whenever you do this, do this remembering me: Bread, law, broken, nurture, "I am".

Communion is not about us. Or about a ritual properly performed, or not. It is not about personal piety practiced in a comfortable place together with other, likeminded people.

Communion is about being confronted with broken bread that reminds us of a broken body. Of wine that reminds us of spilled blood. It is not about personal likes or dislikes, or about how we think we might be nurtured best. It is about attending to the memory of one who we believe has something essential to offer, something that is more than the law, more than "just bread", and can feed us on a deeper level than the signs and miracles we would ask for.

Communion is about community, gathering on a hill, prepared to receive whatever comes our way, following Jesus across the choppy seas of life, braving death, because we are hungry and unable to feed ourselves. Trusting that where we will open our hands and hearts he will put into them what is essential for our lives, what we need to be nurtured and more, so our life will be his, breaking itself up and pouring itself out in his footsteps. Amen.