

What is there to eat?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 1 August, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 10B

**Psalm 104; Contemporary reading: *I Am the Bread of Life* -
by Malcolm Guite ; John, 6: 24-35**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Almost a hundred years ago, a notable book of English Modernist theological essays was published. One leading conservative voiced a classic critique. *The book*, he said, *was a typical example of liberals thinking less about God and far too much about a secular audience. Liberals*, he alleged, *are constantly asking 'what will Jones swallow?' – Jones being the name for the supposed average person in the street.*

The response from the editor of the book was swift. *'I am not asking what Jones will swallow'*, he retorted, *'I am Jones themselves, asking what there is to eat.'* For there is a big difference, isn't there? The idea of asking *'what will Jones swallow?'* is undoubtedly a conservative prejudgment of liberal intentions. Yet it can be one unfortunate dynamic in faith circles, sadly leading down the path of reductionism and beyond.

Asking *'what is there to eat?'* is a much more radical and open question, possibly leading even to revisiting aspects of diets left aside in the past. For a self-confessed 'progressive' church like Pitt Street Uniting Church it is certainly a question which needs to be at the heart of our healthy spiritual pathways. After all, as the missionary theologian D.T. Niles once memorably said, sharing the 'Good News' is essentially about *'one beggar telling other beggars where to find food.'*

So what does this food look like today? And what does our reading this morning from John's Gospel have to say? For John chapter 6 is a lengthy excursus on the bread of life, and how it may be found, or not. What challenges, and opportunities, does this raise for us, as individuals, and as a community together, at this stage in our development?

What is there to eat today, spiritually speaking? For myself, this is at the heart of the contemporary challenges to the Christian community, as indeed it always has been. Answering that question is the main reason that Christian Faith has lasted for two thousand years as a vehicle of divine love and mystery. Yes, there have been a range of supplementary reasons, including the use of force in different ways. Yet, at its heart, the Christian wisdom tradition has continued to flourish whenever and wherever it has provided purposeful pointers and pathways into spiritual sustenance. Its contemporary challenges are many, including those of resources (money and numbers), organisation, and ethical orientation. These consume extraordinary energy within most historic Churches today, almost to the point of obsession.

But what is there to eat? When I say that I was disappointed recently with our Synod's latest Mission Plan, it is not because other traditionally mainstream Churches are doing these things better as institutions. Our Synod Mission Plan has several vital aspects: including seeking to address key issues of demographics, communications and resourcing. The Uniting Church also continues, if slowly and unevenly, to be a beacon of hope for the affirmation of genuine diversity. As a body, it also does a fair job in commitments to justice in the world. Yet, in the face of contemporary ideologies and conspiracies, what does our Church point to as spiritually edible and sustaining? Are we still living off the spiritual and intellectual diets of the past, and in danger of simply rearranging the kitchen utensils, and the cutlery and furniture at the table?

What is there to eat? Each generation is called to answer this question afresh, and this is at the heart of our calling. That is why, for example, the UCA Basis of Union directs us to study the historic Creeds, the great Confessions of the Reformed Tradition, and significant writings of John Wesley. The Basis of Union is clear that these do not provide ultimate definitive answers for 'pilgrims on the way' today. Yet it does affirm that they are still key ingredients and, most of all, that the question with which they wrestled – what is there to eat? – remains our own. We simply cannot live off leftovers alone. As a former university lecturer, and Anglican parishioner of mine, used to say, *when speakers continue to use materials which are not appropriately updated, the result is that we are end up eating ever re-heated cabbage*. How does that tend to taste? Is that what we want to offer as part of the divine feast we celebrate?

What, also, is there to eat in Australia specifically? The Aboriginal Anglican priest Di Langham has long said this question is at the heart of the problems of Christian theology in Australia. In the first years of Aboriginal dispossession, Europeans, literally and spiritually, brought bread and other items to eat from overseas. What was palatable and sustaining for the ancient Roman world, medieval Europe, or earlier Reformed communities, does not easily taste so well in other times and places. For all our mission plans, we can then end up still eating stale, and still very 'white', bread from elsewhere.

Well, that is a long-ish preamble, and I hope not too coloured by own outlook and experience. I offer it however as a framework for this highly significant chapter 6 of John's Gospel, which our lectionary invites us to consider – in bite-sized pieces – this month. Actually, we missed the first part of it, the feeding of the thousands, when we focused on pilgrimage last week. We have three more lectionary weeks of chapter 6 to come however, with the metaphor of bread at its heart. So how do we approach this great story, and what does it provide for us to eat?

I want to suggest that, in relation to John chapter 6, and the broader question of 'what is there to eat?', we do well to approach it through creative use of the classic Methodist formulation known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Now, this was actually coined in the 20th century, drawing on John Wesley's own approaches, which were essentially drawn from the best features of Anglicanism. Scripture (most foundationally), Tradition, and Reason are, after all, the famous 'threefold cord' of the Anglican Method in theology. To this, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral adds Experience, particularly spiritual experience – one of the key elements of Wesleyanism, which it shares with the holiness traditions. In a real sense however, all of these four features sit together, and none are really approached without one or more of the other aspects of the theological search for food.

For example, I think Methodists were right to distinguish Experience alongside Reason as a foundational feature to attend to in a healthy spiritual diet. Reason can also be limited to intellectual, even academic, reflection. Yet strictly speaking, as Anglicans would affirm, Reason is a part of Experience, and we cannot have Reason without Experience. To a great degree, as the Orthodox and many Catholics would affirm, Scripture is also formed by Tradition, and Tradition is always shaped by Scripture. Yet the Wesleyan Quadrilateral continues to offer us a way forward for refreshing, seasoning, and tasting life-giving spiritual fare – albeit some of us might also sometimes extend Scripture to Scriptures plural, and Tradition to wisdom Traditions plural, so that we also draw on the wider spiritual wisdom of humanity.

This morning, in the time that is left to me, let us therefore place today's portion of John chapter 6 in the context, respectively, of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason/Experience. What is there to eat? – or, at least, what is there with which we can begin to cook?

Firstly, John chapter 6 offers us a pathway into more enriching scriptural diets. For once, as one of my theological lecturers used to put it, we begin to break open the scriptures, we open up fresh possibilities of spiritual cuisine. So much presentation of the Bible is at best fast food, and at worst poisonous. Yet the Scriptures were never intended as straightforward pre-prepared packages. Instead, they offer a tremendous variety of ingredients and recipes. As the great English rabbi, and amateur cook, Lionel Blue, used to put it, good spirituality is at the very least *à la carte*, not *table d'hôte*, and works best when we add something of ourselves and our particular tastes and contexts.

Do you remember Penny speaking about John chapter 4 a couple of weeks ago, and the story of the woman at the well? That was a wonderful exposition of a multi-layered piece of writing by the Gospel writer. Very similar intentions and constructions are at play in John chapter 6, albeit less 'R' rated. Here, in John 6, the focus of by-play is not so much sex as the stomach. In a way, Jesus is asking us to reflect more deeply on what is really sustaining for our spiritual stomachs, not just what will fill our bellies, or what others have been used to cooking.

The resonances with the story of the woman at the well in John chapter 4 are striking. There is a very similar play of teasing questions and answers, and most obviously, in verse 34 the words of the crowd – '*Sir, give us this bread always*' – echo directly those of the woman at the well – '*Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty*'. As Penny pointed out recently, John's Gospel does not provide the same kind of direct authorisations of either baptism or the eucharist/communion as are found in the Synoptic Gospels. Yet, in chapter 4 in relation to baptism, and here in chapter 6, in relation to communion/eucharist, we actually find complex and profound sacramental resonances. So, if we may continue to ask about '*what is there to eat?*' in relation to baptism and communion/eucharist, we do well to include John's Gospel as a partner on the way.

John chapter 6 also has deliberate resonances with other parts of the Gospel, not least the story of Nicodemus in chapter 3. As with the story of the woman of the well, John's Jesus is playing with vital metaphors and realities of life. In chapter 3, it is birth or birthing, light and coming out into light. In chapter 4, it is water, and what truly slakes our thirst, including our thirst for intimacy in human relationships. Here, in chapter 6, it is bread, eating, and what food truly satisfies. If we didn't receive the message first time, do we see and receive it now? There is much more here of course, but this is our taster for the moment. We can, and will, go deeper into this enlivening scriptural spirituality in the next few weeks in our Sunday lectionary.

Secondly, intertwined with these subtle and playful scriptural weavings of words and spiritual insights, John chapter 6 challenges us to engage more deeply with the great wisdom Tradition of which we are a part. Rather than ditching all that we have received, our Gospel reading invites us into re-reading and re-shaping our shared Tradition with new shapes and insights. Perhaps we might even call it John's Gospel's invitation to creating 'contemporary fusion' as an approach to spiritual cooking?

Like the story of the woman at the well, this is indeed a kind of Christian 'midrash', re-working traditional materials in fresh ways – scripturally based, but constantly worked-over 'contemporary fusion'? Indeed many scholars today would suggest this is precisely what we see in this text. Behind chapter 6, it is possible to perceive a homily which might perhaps have been given in a synagogue during the early years of the formation of Christianity as a separate movement within Judaeon religion. As such, this text may then have its origins in the attempts of Jesus' contemporaries to find meaning and sustenance in the struggles of their Roman colonialist, and wider oppressive, times. They too were asking: '*what is there to eat?*'

The content of John chapter 6 reflects this underlying, and eternal, question, and the attempts made, in that context, in the post-resurrection era, to provide pointers and pathways to spiritual food. The importance of both drawing on Tradition, and re-shaping it, is central. This is why, in today's Gospel passage, especially verses 31 and 32, we have mention of the manna in the wilderness, and of Moses. In its struggles for life in the midst of religious and Roman repression, the early Johannine Christian community is trying to make sense of what has given life and sustenance in the past, and what, in Christ, there is now to eat. John chapter 6, like the whole of John's Gospel, is such a powerful response. Creatively fusing Tradition, from, and including reworking, Scripture, it offers bread to eat in a fresh and inviting form. As such, it is an encouragement to us to do the same, within our own contemporary circumstances and with both the old, and the new, ingredients available to us.

For, thirdly, and most vitally, John chapter 6 invites us to open ourselves to God afresh by seeing what it calls '*the Bread of Life*' at the centre of living spiritual experience. Without experiencing the Bread, the Christ, our Gospel is telling us, we have missed the point. We may have received gifts of God – whether it be feeding of thousands, or the everyday gifts of grace – but have we actually seen, really tasted, and inwardly digested? Failure to see, really tasted, and really eat and digest what is going on, is the problem the crowds and the religious authorities have in John chapter 6. They have not truly understood what the Bread of Life is – just as Nicodemus struggled to grasp what really coming to birth means, and as the woman at the well struggled to grasp what will truly satisfy our thirsts and desires. T.S Eliot put it this way, in his famous line, that '*we had the experience but missed the meaning*'.ⁱⁱ

Enough for now. We will never work out what it truly means to eat and feast with God in a single Reflection! Nor, in this world, will we ever discover perfectly what there is to eat. However, perhaps my musings, and, still more, John's Gospel, can point us on the way. As we travel on together, as pilgrims on the way, and as we celebrate the feast of God, with bread and with wine today, what are we finding to eat, what will we cook afresh, and what will we share with others?

Let me conclude with a contemporary affirmation of the Bread of Life (the song Broken Body of Christ by The Many) which invites us all to taste and eatⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ From Parable and Paradox: Sonnets on the Sayings of Jesus and other poems

ⁱⁱ In 'Dry Salvages' in The Four Quartets

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPyx89YZLUg>