

Bread of Life

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 8 August, 2021

A Reflection by Marion Maddox, Helen Sanderson and Jolyon Bromley

Pentecost 11B

Proverbs 9:1-6; John 6: 35, 41-51

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

MARION

I've been making bread—strictly as an amateur, so apologies to any professionals—for over twenty-five years. The method I use is sourdough, using a sourdough starter that I made twenty years ago, when we lived in New Zealand. I brought it with me when we moved back to Australia. I declared it at quarantine. They asked, *'Does it contain any fresh fruit or vegetables?'*

Well, all I ever put in the jar was flour and water. That's how you make a sourdough starter: mix together flour and water, and wait for it to go off. It's the going-off that gives it the power to make bread rise, because it absorbs wild yeasts and bacteria out of the air (but no fruit or vegetables!). Over time, the mix in the jar develops fuller flavours and becomes less sour-tasting, which is why I didn't want to just abandon it in New Zealand.

The moment I got excited about making bread was when, as a teenager, we lived in Germany. Coming from suburban Sydney, where bread was factory-made in a very limited range and sold, sliced, in plastic bags, I was absolutely blown away by the variety of breads still being made in traditional ways.

As an adult, I started experimenting with sourdough, which is one of the traditional ways of making bread, using wild yeasts. Today, there's a lot of information available in books and online; but when I started, in the mid-1990s, the internet was new and baking books barely mentioned sourdough. But what I did have was Michael, who ate everything I made, and gave full and frank feedback. Often, it was along the lines of *'this tastes awful'*: my early experiments were often sour and bitter-tasting (sourdough isn't meant to taste sour; the name refers to the acidity of the mixture). But what he never said was, *'stop experimenting'*.

The process of making bread using sourdough is very slow: each loaf, or batch of loaves, takes between twenty-four and thirty-six hours, depending on how I do it. But most of that time is me not doing anything. All I do is intervene from time to time to nudge the process along.



I love the feeling that the process is a collaboration between me and the yeasts and bacteria that have come with me over the last twenty-odd years—and while I'm doing other things, or resting, they get on with the job.

I love the feeling of continuity: each loaf reminds me of all the people I've shared this bread with, both the finished loaves and also bits of the starter, which have gone to make bread for friends, family and colleagues elsewhere in Australia and New Zealand (and a bit of my starter even went to Germany for a while). It grows every time I add flour and water, so it's a gift that can be shared endlessly—and I'll happily share some with you, too, if you'd like some. *

I love watching how the flavour develops, as the community of bacteria and yeasts in the jar take on the characteristics of wherever they happen to be—first in Wellington, NZ, and now in Sydney, and the other places it's travelled to.

I'm not a very mystical person; but making bread is as close to a mystical experience as I get.



HELEN

What nourishes? This is the question which presented itself to me from the readings

Years ago a friend's mother told me this story. As a young Polish, Jewish girl she was imprisoned in Auschwitz during the Second World War. One day, when she was weak and sick, another prisoner gave her a piece of bread. 40 years later she was still telling this story to those who would listen. Maybe this simple act of generosity saved her life. Had she continued to weaken and sicken and been unable to work she might well have been sent to the gas chambers.

Which was more important? The piece of bread or the kindness? Bread, gift of the earth, sustainer of life or kindness that expression of interconnectedness that lifts the spirits and creates courage and hope.

In this pandemic time both are vital to those who have lost their means of support. Think of the food banks, staffed by volunteers, serving the public. On the other side of the fence where I live is the Addison Rd Community Centre. It rescues food from waste and sells it at low cost. Volunteers also pack boxes of food and deliver them to charities for international students, homeless people, asylum seekers or other people in need. Kindness in practice.

Jesus taught, love your neighbour as yourself. I often find it easier to be kinder to my neighbour than myself. This makes me feel undernourished and edgy. My neighbour is important but so am I. In fact we are not separate. For me, being kind to myself includes spiritual nourishment like meditation, or attending worship, expressing myself by making art or writing or enjoying art made by others, theatre or concerts for example.

I am not naturally suited to isolation, though since my husband died, I have been living alone or rather, just with my little dog Coco. She is a constant companion but her conversation is very limited. Still her company is good for me and makes walking compulsory.

When I attach Coco's lead and walk out in the streets around where I live, I greet neighbours from behind my mask, say hello to George in the fruit shop, or to Ti who runs the cafe next door, while Coco greets the other dogs with sniffs or licks. No social distancing for her!

At home I connect with my friends from Pitt St or Sydney Zen on zoom and I hold them in my heart. And I keep in touch with friends and family who I can't see on the phone or by text. All this contributes to my well-being and prevents me from starving from loneliness. It gives me a sense of community.

The Sydney Zen group has the following grace. *'We are grateful for this food. The work of many hands and the sharing of life forms.'* Food connects us to earth which nourishes us in body and spirit. Depending on your beliefs the earth is the creation of God, and the expression of God. When I die I will go back to Mother Earth and become one with her. The Aboriginal people of this land are intimate with country. When they look after country, country takes care of and nourishes them. Singing, dancing and painting country are all part of that.

Recently, before this lockdown, I was at my little house at Hardys Bay. Early one morning some men from Telstra came by in their truck and started hacking at trees as they do. I ran out in my slippers and dressing gown *"What are you doing?"* I yelled. They looked nonplussed. It was obvious. *"Don't chop those trees."* I shouted. *"They are like our aunties. I've known them forever."* Later I laughed at myself. I must have sounded like a madwoman. But on reflection I realised that what I had said was true. Trees, some hundreds of years old are like kin and we depend on them.

The Zen Retreat Centre is at a place called Gorricks Run. It is special country. We have a song which was given to us by an indigenous song woman and goes like this:

*Ancient Ground Ancient ground we will take care of you,
Ancient Ground, Ancient ground you will take care of us.*

When we sit in this place in meditation each moment contains everything, the person sitting breathing next to me, the sun streaming in the window, the vase of grasses on the altar, the lyre bird creating a symphony down by the stream, the goanna checking out the compost for eggs and the kookaburra perched on the stone Buddha. Moment by moment breathing in and out or asking the question: *what nourishes?* contains everything and is nourishing in the deepest sense.

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## JOLYON

When I pray the traditional Jesus prayer I often skip over *"Give us this day our daily bread"*. Unlike people in Jesus' time and many today I rarely experience any uncertainty about where my next meal is coming from.

Yet if I think of it as bread of life, as spiritual nourishment, as awareness, understanding, I know I have considerable daily need.

So, in a way, this is the focus today – the symbolic interplay between the physical reality and the spiritual experience. The bread we eat and the spiritual nourishment we need.

Our texts today give a feast of images. Especially if we take into account the wider context of the loaves and fishes, the feeding of the thousands, the bread that came down from heaven, the manna in the wilderness, the living bread and Wisdom's feast.

I really responded to that quite unfamiliar passage from Proverbs Chapter 9. A wonderful personification of the feminine side of God, as Wisdom! This Wisdom is not locked away in libraries in remote temples or esoteric mystery schools but active, dynamic, vigorous, getting things done – setting up the seven pillars (some translations say she has “*hewn her seven pillars*”, implying she has carved them out of rock).

There are probably levels of significance to the number seven but at the most obvious level it's referencing the seven days of creation. She has built her house, prepared the meal, (again other translations say, slaughtered the animals to prepare the meat dishes).

This Baker-woman of God is not afraid to get her hands dirty. She has baked the bread, she's mixed the wine, she's set the table; and she's sent out her servants to proclaim the invitation to the feast from the highpoints of the town. All are welcome to Wisdom's feast where you gain maturity and insight and spiritual nourishment.

But our central image today is of Christ as the Bread of Life and we could say that this living bread is at the heart of Wisdom's metaphorical feast today. As Jo said last week in that wonderful overarching reflection, there is much in this metaphor to explore over the coming weeks.

There's something tantalising, exciting about a home-cooked loaf fresh from the oven. For me today, the important point is that Jesus doesn't just give us the living bread – he is the living bread. The Bread of Life!

I take it to mean – the Christ within, who is there in us, that we need to consciously connect with to nourish our spirits.

We can know about bread, we can see a loaf, but unless we break it open and eat, it can't nourish us.

We can know about Christ, we can talk about the spirit but unless we open our heart and connect with the spirit within, it we can't nourish us.

So let's give thanks for the Bread of Life!

## MARION'S RECIPE

Here's the recipe I use most often. It's adapted from 'Vermont Sourdough' in Jeffrey Hamelman's *Bread: A Baker's Book of Techniques and Recipes*, but I've tweaked it over the years. This amount will give you one loaf, but you can scale it up or down as required.

Before you go to bed, mix:

**150 g white flour**

**190 g water**

**30 g mature, bubbly, well-fed starter**

Cover the bowl so it doesn't dry out (I use a plate). This is the levain or pre-ferment. By the morning, it should all be bubbly. Mix it in with:

**750 g white flour**

**100 g rye flour**

**550 g water**

Just mix till everything is combined. It will still be quite rough-looking. Cover again and let it sit for between twenty minutes and an hour (I tend to the long side).

Knead for between five and ten minutes. It will be quite soft and sticky, so do this in the bowl, and concentrate on stretching the dough out and then folding it over. Towards the end of the kneading, add:

**20 g salt**

Now the dough begins its long process of developing the gluten (giving it its internal crumb structure) and flavour. Cover and let it sit for another two-and-a-half hours (or longer in cold weather). After that, stretch and fold the dough once or twice (not a whole kneading session, just giving it a bit of encouragement) and leave it, covered, for another 50 minutes (longer in cold weather). Do that last step—stretch, fold, and 50-minute-rest—twice more.

Once your dough is well stretched and rested, shape it into round balls, each of which will become a loaf. It will still be quite soft, so it will need some sort of support for its shape. You can buy special baskets for this step, but I use a colander lined with a cloth. I roll each ball of dough in rice flour (so it won't stick to the cloth) and sit the ball of dough inside the lined colander. Cover it with a plate again so it doesn't dry out—making sure there's room under the plate for it to rise--and leave it for another two-and-a-half hours. Or you can leave it for 8 hours at 10 ° C (winter overnight tip), or up to 18 hours in the fridge. Or you can do a combination: put it in the fridge overnight, then take it out to warm up again and finish rising at room temperature.

You'll know it's ready to bake when it looks substantially bigger than when you started, and when a very gentle finger press into the surface leaves an impression.

Now you have to be brave. Heat your oven really hot—around 250 C (I just turn mine as hot as it will go). Heat whatever you are going to bake the bread on. A pizza stone is good if you have one, or a cast iron baking dish. Best of all is a cast iron or clay pot with a lid, but if you're using something with high sides, there are some tricks to getting the loaf inside it (and don't use your priceless enamelware, because it will never look the same again).

Gently turn the dough out of the colander onto the hot surface. Or, particularly if you are using something with high sides like an iron pot, you can turn it onto a sheet of baking paper and then use that to lower it into the pot. It will lose a bit of volume as you turn it out, but don't worry: it will bounce back up ('oven spring') once it hits the hot oven. Make a couple of cuts in the top of the loaf using your sharpest knife or a razor blade (this helps the dough expand as it bakes).

If you have a spray bottle handy, give it a spray of water before you put it in the oven. Open the oven door and give it another spray after about 10 minutes. If you're using a pot with a lid, bake it covered for about twenty minutes to half an hour, then take the lid off and do the last twenty minutes or so uncovered. Both the spray bottle technique and the pot-with-a-lid technique are to give it a steamy atmosphere, which helps it get extra volume; but neither is essential.

Once the loaf is a nice golden brown, turn off the oven. Extra step for superlative crust: take the loaf out of or off whatever it was in or on, and put the loaf back in the oven. Let it and the oven cool together, with the oven door slightly ajar.

Resist the temptation to cut your bread before it's cool, since the cooling process is part of the cooking and it needs that time for the flavour and texture to be properly finished.