

This week we continue our journey through the sixth chapter of John. These passages invite us to consider the context of faith which encompasses the whole of creation. One of the challenges of modern faith is that so often we think it is all about us – but its not! That doesn't mean our personal faith isn't important – but rather the message of Jesus, then and now, is to address the whole world and not just the needs of one person or group.

John records a series of events in Jesus ministry in John 6; and like all the gospel writers he is trying to help us understand that in that ministry and teaching of Jesus there are parallels with historical prophets and stories. In John's description of Jesus there is an echo of the Exodus story. John 6 intends to show a deeper, fuller understanding of Moses and the Passover which is now revealed in Jesus. The way John tells the story helps the audience make the connections. Faced with this feeding miracle in the wilderness, they are drawn to the story of manna in desert which we hear from Exodus today. They remember the promise that God will raise up a prophet like Moses, and they confess that Jesus is that prophet – but as we explored last week - they struggle to embrace what

this means. Instead of seeing in Jesus the very embodiment of God's glory, love, and Word, they see a king, a political or military figure who might serve their desires.

Before we are too hard on these early disciples, we ought to remember that the Passover was a festival of national liberation from a foreign oppressor. It is an act of revolution to want to make Jesus king. The crowds are certainly acting on their beliefs and acting boldly; but they have missed the point of what has happened. They see Jesus' gracious gift, but they want a glory for him that fits into their assumptions and serves their goals.

How often do we fail to see the depths of what God is doing, because we are focused only on what serves our immediate desires and needs? We fail to realize how graciously God is acting among us, for our sake and for the sake of the whole world. We only see partially or in distorted ways, rather than seeing the depth of the glory of God. This is what the crowds need as well, though it will take all of chapter 6 to tell the story.

Today in the wake of the talk of revolution, the crowd has followed Jesus around the lake, and so the new location brings a new reflection on the

bread of life! John presents Jesus as manna, the miraculous bread God provided and through which Israel learned to trust God's word. The new location is going to provide a new context for the interpretation of the miracles from the previous text. The crowd is still struggling with what happened. The prophet/king understanding of who Jesus is, will now be stretched. It is now time for Jesus to unpack, to deconstruct, the sign. The sign was not about having a belly full of food. The sign is about who Jesus is. Bread is the metaphor. Jesus continues to use the image that comes from the "feeding" miracle. Bread (and fish) is what filled their stomachs. They have become so focused, though, on being full that they have lost what really happened. Jesus uses the bread as an extended metaphor for who he is -- someone capable of truly sustaining life.

So how do we hear this? How do we as a community who is focused so intently on the physical feeding of the hungry, listen for what Jesus is teaching us about a deeper hunger, a deeper understanding of the meaning of a life in faith?

In 1982 there was a great drought in the part of Australia where I grew up. There had been no descent rain in over two years. It is hard to imagine in England, and especially London what that looks like. Fields and paddocks that once were either green or at least root systems for grass – are now so bare that when the wind blows the topsoil blows away. When it did rain, it would wash the topsoil off. Any places where there was still some grass would be covered from dust from the surrounding fields which made it unpalatable to sheep and cattle.

The cattle we had were either fed with wheat which was trucked in, and some of the cattle were trucked to land further north where there had been rain. But the sheep were starving, so my Father and a neighbour merged all their sheep into one mob – about 2000 head of sheep and took to the long paddock. That means that you walk your sheep along the side of the roads and the stock eat the grass as they go along. They did this for many months and during this time, they and their sheep walked hundreds of kilometres, at least 6 kms each day eating as they went. Finding water every day was a huge challenge.

I was a school, but on weekends, or when they had big roads or hills to cross we all went out and travelled with them. It was a strange time, and a hard time for everyone. I have lots of strong memories from that period. But one is of one Saturday afternoon when we have been walking for about 6 weeks, our minister came and met us. For that weekend we were in a big paddock, with some large gum trees in it. We had a picnic BBQ, but before we ate we had a communion service together – just the two walking families, the minister, 2000 sheep and some dogs.

As we stood in that paddock and sung a hymn and broke bread together and gave thanks to God - I felt full – I think we all did – not from the hunger of the drought – but from the hunger of the pain of the journey we were on. There was something about our shared prayer – our shared faith – that amidst all that was happening God, Jesus was walking with us. Still nearly 40 years later that afternoon service in the middle of field is one of the strongest images of the Eucharist, faith, and the power of God's love, that I have

Jesus message to those who were following him was that he did not come to fulfil just their

physical hunger, but rather to truly transform their lives and to know that they are not alone. For me standing in that paddock with those sheep and my family was a formative moment in my faith – it is hard for me to deny God's presence – because on that day I knew God was there. Even in the midst of the drought, and the isolation and the pain our families were living through – God was with us.

Jesus was physically with the crowds who were following him around the lake, and he was challenging them, stretching them to look beyond the horror or even pain of their immediate need to see more fully the presence of God with them.

Jesus is giving an outward and visible sign of all that is possible in the kingdom of God, of all that is possible if we love God and dare to love ourselves.

This is why we come and share the Eucharist each week – it is an outward sign of our inward journey. When the crowd asked for a sign Jesus says to them 'Jesus said to them, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

This is the promise of our faith. The embrace of Jesus love.

If we dare to come in all our vulnerability to God, if we dare to forgive and ask for forgiveness, if we dare to love and allow ourselves to be loved – we have understood what Jesus is offering.

We are living in very challenging times for many people and for our planet; and into that challenge the voice of God says the same to us. 'I am the bread of life' – come! **Amen.**