

St Columba, 2nd August

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John 6:24-35,
Ephes 4: 1-6

Bread of Life: Believe in Me

Bold messages are great for gathering groups of people and polarising them either because they are captivated by what they hear and want 'in' on the plan , or because they are so dismayed by what they are hearing they want to oppose it by the strongest possible means and so get together with others of like mind to do so.

There is a bit of that going on in Auckland at the moment with Rodney Hide's pronouncements on the Super City proposals, and nationally with the rush of policies being announced: the redirecting of 2million dollars away for the most severely physically disabled in the general support fund for children with disabilities; the cut in the retraining allowances; sending combat troops to Afghanistan and pulling out the reconstruction and building Unit.... It's a bit like the old days....we might even see a protest group or two! There are certainly plenty of letters in the paper.

After the events on the hillside set out in the reading last week Jesus is a bit rattled by the reaction of the crowd. They had been happy to eat the meal provided - and what group of hungry people, peasant farmers – wouldn't be? They did not want to miss out if he was going to provide more food to supplement their substance diet! We are told that as a result of their experience they saw him as a man with an egalitarian vision –a vision of a future in which everyone would have enough to eat; where food and wealth would be shared so everyone

has enough. They were so captivated by the vision of this 'kingdom' that he was preaching - and demonstrating in his own lifestyle - that they wanted to make him king! Presumable king of the kingdom he was proclaiming! After all Moses fed the people in the desert with God's bread, manna, so too Jesus had fed the people making sure their needs were met. Presumably then, he would make sure there was enough of whatever was required to meet their needs of the long-term.

As far as we can tell, that however, wasn't Jesus plan or message, so he escapes the crowd in a boat. They seem to have misunderstood. He did not want to be king. He wanted a more fundamental change in the situation than that.

The change he wanted is written in the last line of the reading. It was a puzzle to the people to whom it was said, and it is a puzzle to us today.

Jesus said "believe in me".

Belief and faith are words that carry similar meanings and are often used interchangeably today. In our contemporary western society 'belief' and 'faith' are words that have taken on an intellectual response, suggesting we expect to give conscious assent to some set of precepts or ideas. In Middle Eastern societies particularly in the time of Jesus, they represented something different. They were words that expressed the glue that held society together and indicated a more intuitive, gut level, response to the circumstances - more like Pacific cultures today. They point to what binds people and families and groups together not in an intellectual way but in a deeper way. We can

expand ideas of 'faith' with words like faithfulness and fidelity, trust and loyalty and belonging. It is toward these expanded nuances that Jesus is pointing to when he says 'believe in me'.

So when the people ask to be given the 'bread of life' that comes from God and will provide eternal life, he says in reply

"I am the bread of life, believe in me."

'Have faith in me, be loyal to what I am teaching, centre yourselves on the life that God gifts and honour the word that I proclaim...'

This is what Jesus is saying encapsulated in the image of himself as the 'bread of life' and in his use of the words 'believe in me.'" He is pointing to the very fundamentals required by all of us to live well as individual persons and as communities. He is challenging those who hear to respond positively to what he is saying and doing.

Unpacked and summarised, what he has been saying and doing is:

- healing people and restoring them to community participation – to fullness of life
- Urging people to love one and act toward one another with compassion and empathy
- To be concerned to distribute the wealth and resources of the earth equitably
- To encourage one another, and respect one another with all the differences and variety that are amongst us
- To recognise God in those things that bring life and hope and healing and hope
- To centre on God – to be loyal and focussed as it were

- He invited people to take time to listen to the word of God in their hearts (in that deep seat of spiritual and emotional response) to be still from time to time – to pray
- To do those things that demonstrate the love and concern of God

The people ask Jesus “what must we do to perform the works of God?” ‘Believe in the one God has sent’ Jesus replies. This is no intellectual assent he is seeking, rather the ‘belief’ is to be acted out; performed, through loyalty and commitment to and solidarity with the group developing around Jesus. Together they will change the world in ways that bring to life in their midst the kingdom of Jesus vision and preaching.

It is all a bit subversive! Certainly scholars exploring the Biblical material are at pains to tell us that these teaching of Jesus are building a movement of ‘resistance fighters’ or people who were willing to practice ‘passive resistance’ might be a more accurate way of describing them, people who are intent on changing the status quo of the political and religious systems in the interest of justice, peace and healing. And we know how the political and religious systems were polarised and reacted – eventually killing Jesus, the lynch-pin of this transformational movement. But that is not yet....

For now he is proclaiming a bold message of social and religious transformation that is gathering a group inspired by what they hear and see. And it is in the footsteps of this group that we stand. The ‘way of Jesus’ was, to work with others to form a group that wanted to see social justice for all people, to shape a religious framework that would

support and include and heal, and develop a personal resilience that would enable a whole-hearted 'yes' to be said in commitment to the life giving gifts of God that are available to everyone (not just to a select few).

None of it is easy, though in our time of instant response and success we would like it to be! The deep response of body, spirit and mind that is required to the offer of bread and to the invitation to believe, remains just as critical in our needy and suffering world today as it was 2000 years ago

"I am the bread of life, believe in me!" Can we? What would it mean for you?