

Bread of life
St. Paul's, Milford
Sunday 2 August 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

The Gospel readings for the next four Sundays are all taken from the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. They deal with Jesus as the bread of life. From the closing words of today's gospel: *I am the bread of life, he said, whomever comes to me will never be hungry and whomever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

Bread is mentioned many times in the Scriptures. Almost as often as water. Bread and water, the most ordinary of food items and yet the most indispensable. Even a prisoner in olden times was given bread and water.

We're then taken to the OT lesson, from Exodus, a passage that's closely related, not accidentally but by design. For the next four weeks we're going to follow the progress of the people of Israel, how they gradually moved away out of the land of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the promised land. A journey that took time, many years in fact. And it wasn't straight sailing by any means. That's clear from today's reading.

The whole congregation (as they're called) complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. They sound like a bunch of disgruntled airline passengers travelling economy and moaning to the cabin crew. And not just minor irritations either, not just because the fellow in front has tilted his seat back too far or because the crowd across the aisle have brought on far too much stuff for the overhead luggage compartment.

No, this was far more serious. *"If only we'd died in Egypt! It's your fault: you brought us out into this wilderness to kill us all with hunger."* That's been a frequent complaint by new arrivals in many countries. Many of the first European settlers complained when they arrived in NZ in the middle of the 19th century. They had responded to advertisements; to the fast-talking salesmen engaged by the NZ Company. The publicity painted a picture of a model community, a semi-rural paradise.

But the street plans were prepared in England by people who hadn't seen the country. They assumed that the parcel of land was flat when in fact it was a steep hill. In Wellington each settler was given a town section and also 100 'country acres' on which they could grow their food and support themselves initially. However the valley at Petone was a mix of dense forest, scrub, flax and swamp, prone to flooding and with a beach so flat ships were forced to anchor a mile from the shore. Within two months of their arrival the settlers voted to move the town from Petone to Thorndon, one of the few comparatively flat areas in the harbour.

The word 'complain' appears many times in this story – and yet nowhere are the people chided or condemned. Just like our pioneer settlers they had much to complain about. We shouldn't be too eager to label them as ungrateful. They complained bitterly and, in fact, God hears them and responds to their needs. *I'm going to rain bread from heaven and each day the people will go out and gather enough.*

The fact is there is simply no food on Sinai, where this took place, no vegetation to speak of, no life except a scruffy old camel striding haughtily into the distance.

But sure enough, in that unpromising environment a miracle took place. They received two things: manna and quails. But they weren't entirely convinced. "What's this stuff?" they asked. They had no idea what it was. I think Moses had some explaining to do!

Manna, the stuff on the ground, is a secretion of insects found on tamarisk bushes in early summer. And there was a layer of dew in the morning. As it lifted they found a fine flaky substance – it looked like a big frost – and the Israelites, the complaining people, looked at it. What's this stuff? But Moses comes to the rescue: It's the bread the Lord has given you!

But this gift remains a question, not a certainty.

If you gather a little there's enough.

If you greedily gather up a lot there's still just enough.

If you gather just the right amount it's the right amount.

Quail in that part of the world are aggressive, vicious little birds, which fly south on their migration route and often drop in to rest, exhausted. But in the evening quail came and covered the camp.

It's impossible for us to read this passage without drawing a link between it and John's passage about the bread of life. And that's intentional. Jesus says: *Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness. It's written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat. But, says Jesus, it wasn't Moses who gave them this bread from heaven. It's my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.*

It's easy to see God's gifts here as belonging to a long-ago people who were dependent on God. It's a nice story, we think, but it hasn't got much to do with us today. But their lesson is our lesson as well. We tend to think that farmers and smart people ensure that we will have enough food. Yet, despite all that, it's God who has made a planet where the seeds awaken to feed the world. Just because something is part of our ordinary lives doesn't mean it's not miraculous.

Whether we see it or not we depend on God for our daily bread, just as the people in the wilderness did. This world is full of a great variety of plants and animals that feed us all in a complex ecosystem. We're the ones who made it possible for food to be more available in some places than others; for some (us) to receive more than others. But God's plan is a table for all - a definition that turns our world upside down. There is enough for all, but it's not fairly distributed. It's not a problem of production, but rather one of distribution.

In summary, once we stop and understand the context, this text is not one where we should stand in judgment of our ancient brothers and sisters. Instead we should stand in their shoes and look around. To see how God wishes us to order the world.

God provides and we are to take what we need; nothing more, nothing less. Greed and trust are incompatible. God still provides a world rich in resources and we should marvel at this over-abundance of God's gifts. Possibly, we react to the

people's 'complaining' because we know we shouldn't ever think of complaining with all the gifts we have.

I turn now to the Epistle. And you might, as I did initially, wonder what it's got to do with the Gospel and the OT Lesson. Maybe the answer's in the first verse. Paul begs us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called; a life filled with humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, seeking peace and unity. But skip a few verses to this one:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers; to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

As a result of the gifts we've been given we're each called to particular ministries. Here it refers to apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. You may think: that's not me. I'm not on the list! But it's not really limited. If you like, change those words to other callings. Being called to work with children, to be a nurse, to comfort those who have lost loved ones, to look after the buildings, deal with the technology, to have administrative skills, to provide leadership to a team, to be a good hostess, to keep your cool and offer helpful advice and support over the phone. Those are just a few of the tasks the church needs people to do. But let's go beyond the church - to the community, the school, your place of work, your retirement village and so on. Your home: your role as a mother, a father, a care-giver.

It looks like a list but let me share with you an insight I gained many years ago in relation to this passage. It was in an article called 'The Fatal Comma'. Have another look at that passage, the same passage. Find the comma, in the 5th line of the second page, between the words '*equip the saints for the work of ministry*' and before the words '*for building up the body of Christ*'. As it stands it's a list. 'Equip the saints for the work of ministry' seems to be separate from 'building up the body of Christ'. But take out the comma. It makes a significant change. All those listed items are not separate things at all. Instead,

they're all focused on the overall task of building up the body of Christ, of building up our unity. The task of the Church therefore is this: 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ'. No comma. All that we do is - or should be - to build up the body of Christ, the church. Not only to lead a group, teach some children, comfort someone, change a light bulb, knock out a wall, answer the phone or serve in the Op Shop. No, more than that.

Skip finally to the end of the passage. Whatever we do, it says, we're concerned about building unity. *As each part is working properly it promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.* The unity of the whole built up by each part contributing to the end result. So that (see the final verse) *joined and knitted together by every ligament ... as each part is working properly ... promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*

Let us rejoice in the unity we have as a congregation. Let us pray that we will develop and share the gifts we have and together use them for the building up of the Body of Christ in this place.