

Bread continues as our theme this week. The 5,000 have been fed and Jesus has escaped but they go looking for him. They want to know how he got to Capernaum ahead of them. They want to know where he came from. He knows that they followed him looking for more food. They demand a sign to prove that he is someone to whom they should pay attention. Either they don't understand that they were fed by means of a miracle or that one miracle wasn't enough. Crowds can be like that, irrational and insatiable. They murmur about the manna that Moses gave them in the wilderness at which point Jesus corrects them and says that it was God that gave them the manna, the bread from heaven. The crowd then asks for this bread and Jesus tells them "I am the bread of life". Jesus means that he has come down from heaven, he is their food from God; he is the source of life and belief in him is what is important.

Bread is a basic food throughout much of the world. Bread is offered as a sign of hospitality throughout the Hebrew Bible. When people are hungry it is bread that basic foodstuff which they crave. Remember how the peasants demanded bread from Marie Antoinette? Bread is so basic that that we even use bread as a slang term for money. If you struggle with trying to maintain a low-carb diet as I do you also know that it is a forbidden substance which makes the craving for bread even more powerful.

Our celebration of the Eucharist has its foundation in the traditional Jewish blessing over bread at the beginning of the meal and the blessing of wine at the end of the meal. Even if John's gospel does not contain the Words of Institution from the last supper, "take, eat this is my body given for you" it doesn't get much clearer than John's depiction of Jesus' statement "I am the bread of life" to understand that this bread that we eat is more than bread.

Now admittedly when it comes to the mysteries of the Eucharist, when it comes to understanding what we experience when we bless and share the bread and the wine it can be hard to associate the wafers with the coarse barley loaves that Jesus would have broken during his meals. Many years ago an elderly woman was held to have said that she had less difficulty believing that the wafer was the body of Jesus Christ than believing that it was actually bread.

Who doesn't remember the first time they received communion? The first time you had to come to the altar rail to receive the body and trying so very hard to think of it as Jesus as you were trying to get this pasty substance unstuck from the roof of your mouth. If you were raised Roman Catholic you might have been warned not to touch it with your teeth because you would be chewing Jesus!

Wafers, unleavened bread to be precise, came into use sometime in the ninth century in Western Christianity. Some thought that because the Last Supper was a Passover meal it shouldn't contain leaven because the bread Jesus was using wouldn't have had leaven and furthermore leaven was considered a sign of contamination of sin. On the other hand in the Eastern Church the bread is always leavened because it was a sign of the resurrection and in John's gospel the last Supper takes place the night before Passover so the bread Jesus was using would have been leavened.

In the Anglican Church we can use whatever kind of bread we like as long as it is bread.

Regardless of whether we use leavened or unleavened bread, Holy Communion is a fundamental component of our worship service. How many of you feel that it is not a real service unless you receive communion? Now this wasn't always the case, until the last generation or so Holy Eucharist was not necessarily a part of every Sunday Service. Do you miss it when we do Morning Prayer, if so why? This raises the question of what we think we receive in Holy Communion. The second question then is how is Jesus the bread of life, our bread of life?

Many of us believe that what we receive in Holy Communion is the body and blood of Jesus Christ, that our prayers, the prayers that the priest offers on behalf of the people and in which the people participate during the Great Thanksgiving effect some kind of transformation in the elements. Now do they become actual flesh and blood, do they lose their properties of bread and wine? Common sense tells us no and even at its most mystical this is not a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church either. As Anglicans, we tend to believe or accept what is called the "Real Presence" of Jesus in the elements, that Jesus is present but we do not say how leaving the mechanics as a mystery. Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Queen Elizabeth 1 is quoted as saying "*Christ was the word that spake it, / He took the bread and brake it, / And what the word did make it, / That I believe and take it.*" In any event we do treat the consecrated elements as different and we set them aside in the ambry as what is called the reserved sacrament...although that is not the case in all Episcopal or Anglican churches. Neither one nor the other is right, it depends on your personal piety. There is no official doctrine of the Eucharist in the Episcopal Church.

Moreover the questions of the transformation of the elements is far less important than what happens when we come together to offer our prayers of thanksgiving at this memorial feast.

When Jesus ate with people it was a sign of the coming reign of God because heaven was likened to a great feast. Each time we gather at this holy table we recall our salvation history, God's goodness in creating the world and our fall from grace and God's generosity in sending us his only Son for our redemption. In these prayers we offer a sacrifice of ourselves, our souls, and our bodies so that we share in Jesus' body given in death and in the salvation brought about by his death and we pray for the hope of resurrection in the life to come. By invoking the Holy Spirit we make Christ's sacrifice in the past fully present so that we participate in it in the present. We're not just talking about back there back then but right here, right now. For this reason too in the Words of Institution, when Jesus says to eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of him, we can receive our bread and wine as his body and blood. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are united with Christ and each other.

To receive Holy Communion is more than a personal experience of Jesus. Participating in the Eucharist nourishes us as individuals but it also brings us together as a community. Paul equated communion in the body of Christ with being part of a community in the body of Christ. The covenant which we renew with Christ in the Eucharist is therefore a covenant with each of us who are members of the body of Christ. "so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another." (Rom 12:5). This multi-sided brings up Jesus' commandments to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. This is why we say that there is no

such thing as a Christian without community and why the idea of being spiritual but not religious is not compatible with Christianity.

It is the unity forged in the Eucharist that in the words of our stewardship theme enables us to “Come together in faithful community to serve God in the world.” Please join us following the service as we make our plans for the coming year.

Jesus said he was the bread of life and the letter to the Ephesians sums up the impact of what it means to partake of this bread to respond to this call to be part of the body.

*“I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”*

Amen

(Eph 4:1-6 NRS)