

Sunday 29th July 2018
Trinity 9 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: 2 Kings 4.42-end
NT: Ephesians 3.14-end
G: John 6.1-12

I recently discovered that I have more in common with Fr Fergus than you might at first imagine.

A news article about the finding of bread dating back to 12,000 BC, prompted a Tweet from Fr Fergus about the ancient bread that can be found in his parents' breadbin. To which I was able to respond that my brother always referred to our parents' breadbin as the Lancashire Bread Museum. Clearly, we both come from families that like to hold on to their bread until it crumbles to dust.

Today is the first instalment of chapter 6 from John's Gospel. Throughout most of this Church year, we are reading Mark's gospel but it's too short for the whole year so the summer weeks are plumped up with readings from John. Chapter 6 is a crucial, complex piece of teaching from Jesus. It confirms him as the foundation of the Church, a Church built with the bricks which are each one of us, held together by the mortar of his body and blood, the Eucharist.

Despite its essential nature, it's not always easy to preach on, especially as week by week you find yourself becoming repetitive. I was busy congratulating myself on going first this summer, so that I could make all the clever points and leave my clergy colleagues to scabble for something new to say – I was smug until I realised that the August rota was not yet out and I'd probably to have another go at this!

The chapter begins with this oh so familiar story – the feeding of the five thousand.

These people had initially followed Jesus because they were hungry, not for bread but for the healing that they had witnessed. They had seen what he had done for so many sick people, they had heard how he taught with authority and they wanted more. Their current diet from the religious authorities left them weak and in need. The Law was punitive not empowering. This man Jesus seemed to be offering something so much more substantial. That Jesus decided that they needed to be physically as well as spiritually fed shows his ever-present readiness to care for all aspects of our lives. This was true pastoral care, not just a teaching opportunity.

But still it was an excellent teaching opportunity. This crowd was fed, not from external resources but from the bread and fish brought by one of the least of them, a boy. What initially seemed meagre, became more than sufficient for all the people once it was blessed by God. And everyone in the crowd was offered food, there was no distinction made about gender or race or age or any other divisive categorisation. All were offered food, all ate. And this act of eating together bonded this crowd, they shared food, they shared a miracle. They had a common experience which could touch and affect their lives in so many ways if they reflected and were open to the opportunities that were being offered to them. The first of these opportunities being to continue to follow Jesus, to hear more about the true significance of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, to learn about the Eucharist. But more on this as Chapter 6 unfolds. What are the lessons from this first section?

Yesterday, I was part of a very large crowd, certainly thousands, maybe even five. I walked with other Christians in the Pride March because I believe that as Christians we are called to love one another and not to question God's judgement in creating us all to be different, and in doing so reflecting the richness of his grace.

That crowd of people were of all shapes and sizes, of various races and creeds, of different genders and ages. All of us with our own experiences which sadly for some have been bitter and hard, all with our own talents and abilities, our weaknesses and needs. As we walked, I was reminded of Paul's words from today's reading:-

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

This crowd was testament to the lavish generosity of God. Our creator God has what you might call a Jackson Pollack approach to his creation, extravagantly throwing paint of every shade across the canvas of humanity so that this rich diversity becomes just a pale reflection of the glory of God. A pale reflection because that is all our poor eyes can tolerate in this world and even then we need to view its splendour through the lens of the gospel in order to appreciate its beauty.

The route along the march yesterday was lined with all kinds of people waving rainbow flags and shouting support. As we were coming up Lord St, the word went out that the protesters would be on the Victoria memorial as they apparently usually are and that we should ignore them or simply smile and wave. To be honest, when we got there, there wasn't much to see. A few banners quoting scripture that were too small to read. The police were there and a large crowd of supporters of Pride had strategically placed themselves between the protestors and the marchers to purposely minimise any disruption. I did smile and wave and wondered at first what all the fuss was about. But then I realised that the tension I had noticed in some of my fellow marchers reflected years of hurt and discrimination, for them this was real and painful.

How dare we call ourselves Christian and feel justified in inflicting such pain in the name of God? What gives anyone the right to think that somehow God has made a mistake in creating some people simply because they are different from us? How absurdly presumptuous can we be?

Bread should be fresh, unless you happen to be my parents or Fr Fergus's. Faith too should be fresh. It should be challenged daily by prayer, by being open to the Holy Spirit and the continual developing of our understanding of the scriptures, by reflection on the experiences we have and the people we meet. In other words, our faith should be renewed each day by our encounters with God as we grow in our relationship with him. Stale faith like stale bread belongs in the bin – the dustbin. But I thank God that there are many more who wish to celebrate our diversity rather than those who would deny it.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Revd Michelle Montrose