

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15

Ps 77

Eph 4:17, 20-24

John 6:24-35

The Gospel passage we have just heard is the beginning of the famous “Bread of Life Discourse” in John’s Gospel, the entirety of which we would normally hear of the next few weeks (though this year it will be interrupted by some special feasts). As with most of Saint John’s Gospel the dialogue is extremely rich with meaning, and so much of our theology about the Eucharist comes from Jesus’ comments in this chapter. There’s so much we could say about the Eucharist from these texts, but for this week I’d like to start with something that’s more to do with our response—or lack thereof—to what Jesus is offering us.

What we see is often affected by what we’re looking for. For instance, at a parish morning tea recently I saw someone who’s been away for a few weeks and who I wanted to say “Hi” to. I was trying to get their attention, and even though they were heading straight for me, they didn’t notice me and in fact they almost walked straight into me. Why? Because they were so focused on the delicious scones on the table next to me! I’m sure you’ve all had moments like this, on both the giving and receiving end. It’s pretty easy to miss something right under our nose, simply because we’re not looking for it or expecting to see it. What we’re looking for affects what we see.

This principle is at work in our Gospel today. If you recall from last week, the people have literally *just* been fed by Jesus, in the miracle of the loaves, and Jesus has only just taken his leave. And once again, the crowd follows him in droves. And, just like last time, when Jesus arrives on the opposite shore, this same crowd is waiting for him. And as the dialog in the Gospel makes clear, the crowd wanted to see Jesus do the bread trick again. What they were looking for was a magician, and one that could feed them at that. Listen to how they needle Jesus after he tries to draw their attention back to God:

“What sign will you give to show us that we should believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers had manna to eat in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”

Translation: “Enough of all that ‘God’ stuff – do the bread trick again.” And when Jesus says, “The true bread is what God provides from Heaven”, they literally can’t hear what he’s really saying through all their salivating: “HE SAID BREAD! HE’S GONNA DO THE BREAD TRICK AGAIN!” So they say to him “Give us this bread! *Always!*” To which Jesus responds: “I am the bread of life.” With one final push, he essentially says “I am he who will satisfy you.”

And as we see in the passages that follow, the people around Jesus really get upset with him for this and fail to see the point – namely, that God is literally standing right in front of them.

Why is this? I mean, Jesus has already shown them a pretty convincing sign in the multiplication of the loaves, to the point that the people were ready to make him king. But the people weren't able to see Jesus as God because they were operating with a different concept of what they thought God would or should be. They were essentially looking for a bread-dispenser. A God who would give them whatever they wanted, no questions asked. But if Jesus won't be a simple bread dispenser, then they couldn't receive the far-greater thing he *was* offering. Since their appetites were locked-in on material satisfaction, they weren't able to see the greater wellspring of happiness that was right in front of their noses. And then they get upset when God didn't play along.

Let's take a step back for a moment. Imagine rejecting the God of the universe in favour of a loaf of bread. The happiness and meaning turned down in this equation is mind boggling. And yet we *all* do it, *all* the time. It's like someone dying of thirst in the desert rejecting the oasis because it's not bottled water from the supermarket.

What we look for conditions what we see. It's just as true for us as it is for the people in our Gospel today. And so it's worth asking ourselves: what are we looking for? Are we really open to seeing God as he is, and not how we want him to be? Are we willing to open our horizons and encounter the God who is true, good and beautiful? Are we willing to see God at work in our lives in hidden humility, such as in the Eucharist and the other sacraments? Faith requires an openness to meet God on his own terms.

If we're honest, we often lean in the other direction. We can get easily frustrated when our material needs aren't met, or when God doesn't behave the way we want or expect. I'm reminded of a guy I knew at university, who, a bit like the people in the gospel today, thought he "disproved" God's existence. He put a glass of water on the table and said "If there is a God, he'll knock the glass over to prove to me that he exists, and thus save my soul." Unsurprisingly, the glass stayed put. But this didn't disprove God. It just proved the age old proverb: In carefully controlled laboratory conditions, God will do whatever he wants. And I for one am glad for that. It would be a rather small God who was beholden to every angry teenager, constantly knocking over water glasses, begging to be noticed.

If we want to meet the real, living God, who is a wellspring of quiet, refreshing joy, we need to accept that this will mean having our idols broken and encountering him in *truth*. What we look for conditions what we see. And this means we have to be open to looking for him *where he is* and *how he reveals himself*. This may mean abandoning the reduced version of God we've been looking for – the God of our political persuasion, of our taste in music, or whose image and likeness is found only in people who we like.

And it will require seeking God where he has chosen to reveal himself – in the scriptures, in prayer and the sacraments, and in the teachings of the Church... even when we find them difficult. It also means being open to seeing God in our neighbour, in a beautiful work of art, in the wonder of nature, in the cry of the poor, and so forth.

But it is in the Mass—in the Eucharist—that God offers himself to us in his most perfect disguise. When everything else falls away, when we realise that the deepest longings of our hearts cannot be fulfilled by any amount of money, or sex, or alcohol, or success; when we finally come to see that it's all vanity and that it's all passing away... maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to begin to understand how amazing and how truly needed the Holy Eucharist is.

What appears to be nothing—a simple piece of bread—is actually everything. Who would have thought that the real answer to everything our hurting hearts long for would be found here? And yet there is nothing more true on this earth. The Author of all things—the God of heaven and earth—is present among us in this most unlikely and most beautiful of ways. And he waits to fill us—to complete us—with his own life, his own Body and Blood. Though he appears as nothing, he is in fact our *everything*. And he says to us, as he said to the crowd two thousand years ago: “He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst.”