

Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2015 10.00am

Psalm 78.23-29

Gospel: John 6. 24-35

Today's Gospel is the second in a series of five readings from Chapter 6 of John's Gospel. It follows last week's and depends on it. So, before we continue, let me retell the story. Jesus was trying to escape the crowds with his disciples. But the crowd wouldn't leave him alone. They'd seen him heal the sick and they want more miracles. So they follow him. When Jesus sees the size of the crowd he decides to feed them. After they've eaten all they can they try to make him king. But he withdraws up the mountain. In the evening, the disciples set off for Capernaum, but a storm blows up on the lake and threatens their lives. John doesn't tell us Jesus calmed the storm. He just says he walked on the water. And the disciples ask him to get into the boat with them. The next day, the crowd wakes up to discover that Jesus has left, so they also get into boats and go back to Capernaum to find him. This rush to find Jesus comes just before today's reading.

Today we begin with a crowd of anxious, empty people, trying to assuage their hunger. Their hunger was very real. If they'd got jobs that could feed them, they'd not be chasing Jesus, trying to make him king. But on the assumption that, since he's assuaged their physical hunger once, he could do it again. And that he might even be able change the circumstances that prevent them from earning enough to feed themselves. They want to make sure they don't lose touch with him. I've spoken about moments like before, as having the potential, to be liminal moments, moments, events, or situations that create an inner crisis or challenge or change us. In the language of faith, they're moments of conversion, of turning around that result in our relationships, beliefs and lives being transformed. They're most creative when we're aware that there is something wrong with our lives – when we know that we're hungry and anxious – and we glimpse the emptiness of our lives. Simone Weil, a 20<sup>th</sup> century French mystic, calls this emptiness, a void, but she doesn't see it as a problem – rather as an opportunity. She says, "*It is grace that forms the void inside of us and ... grace alone that can fill the void.*" So if "*Grace leads us to the state of emptiness, to that momentary sense of meaninglessness...*"<sup>1</sup> then grace also provides the means by which the void is filled. There's one thing we can be sure about, 'though, and that's that the void we not be filled as expect. And recognising that we are empty and vulnerable is a necessary stage on the journey. So, we shouldn't be surprised, that as the crowd rush to get what they want, Jesus tries to help them to see beneath their immediate needs to the void, the emptiness, that lies beneath their headlong rush to fill the emptiness they've not yet begun to understand.

The crowd begins the conversation. "*When did you come here?*" Their question sounds odd, but we need to remember that they don't know about Jesus walking on water, and the last time they saw him he was going up a mountain. Jesus doesn't answer them. Instead, he makes a comment about them following him, but because he fed them. And then, he says, "*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*" Their second question follows immediately. "*What must we*

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York 1999/2003, 46.

*do to perform the works of God?"* The crowd give the word "work" a new meaning. When Jesus replied to their first question, he'd said, *"Do not work for the food that perishes."* In other words, receive it, because there is nothing for you to do. You can't work for it. In their question, the grace Jesus offers disappears, with their need to do something about their problem. It happens over and over again. When we encounter God we assume that we must do something. *"What must we do?"* Jesus doesn't answer them. And he doesn't answer them because their question misses the point. *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent"* To believe is to trust that in Jesus's life, flesh and works, God is present on earth. Belief isn't about what we do but being open to what God is doing. It sounds simple if we say it quickly. But it's not. For if we open ourselves to what God is doing, it means our doing is less important because we are not in charge, let alone in control. And if we're going to give up control, we usually need some assurance, some guarantee. So maybe we can understand the crowd's question. *"What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?"* Since they're looking for a political king like David, and a prophet like Moses, what better sign than manna in the wilderness. When Moses gave manna to their ancestors, their ancestors believed. But Jesus points out that it was God that the people in the wilderness. And what made the feeding a sign was not the manna. It was that the manna came down from heaven. He continues, *"...it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* When the crowd demands bread, Jesus says, *"I am the bread of life."*

It seems amazing to us that Jesus' questioners miss the point over and over again. Yet this is what John wants to show us. Over and over again, in John's Gospel, Jesus and the crowd use the same words, but with very different meanings. The point is that these conversations operate on two levels. And the crowd's inability to see this arises out of their inability to see their emptiness. Their questions are designed to help them get what they want, rather than get to the heart of the deeper challenge Jesus' actions present them with – a challenge which would really have filled them. So, when Jesus replies, he's trying to help them understand, that he is the sign that points to God. That only God could fill their emptiness. And if they'd believe that he could give them abundant life, they'd receive the life, the grace, the fullness they were chasing him all over the country to find. But they don't get it. Or - maybe they don't really want to understand that he's trying to tell them who he is, and how in him, they can learn to really live. And they don't want to understand, because if they do, they'll have to face their emptiness, the void within, and that's hard. It's hard for God's people in every time and place. It's why we get so quickly side-tracked by miracles and the other things and people that fill our emptiness. When Jesus says *"I am the bread of life,"* he is inviting us to look beyond these things. He's inviting us to believe that his life is the sign that points to God. And he's offering us the possibility of receiving abundant life by trusting God with our lives. Not just with the joyful things, but also – and more importantly - with our emptiness, our vulnerability and our fear. For when we take that risk, we discover that there isn't anywhere deeper to fall, than into God's presence. A presence that is both challenging and life-sustaining. And all it asks of us is to open ourselves to trust in God's gracious longing to feed and fill us. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen

2<sup>nd</sup> August 2015