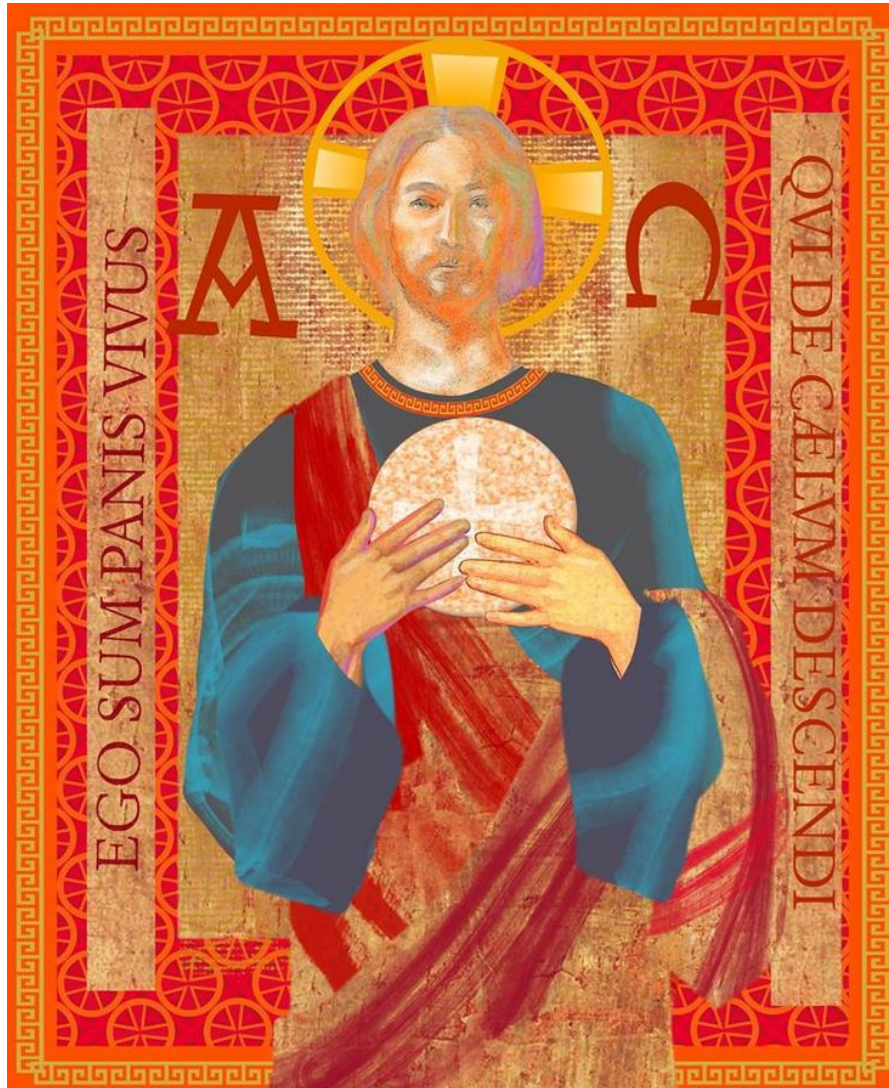


the Sunday Readings



“My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”
(John 6 : 55 – 56)

20th Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

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*further teaching on the 'Bread of Life'*¹

introduction

We gather to further reflect on the *'Bread of Life Sermon'* in John's gospel. We might be tempted to see the Eucharist only in terms of correct belief – but if the Eucharistic action entails personal transformation, then the meaning of God's realm can neither be trivialized nor spiritualized. Matters of justice are at the heart of Jesus' words and practise! Teaching in the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus goes back to the theme of bread and presents himself as, *'the bread of life'*. While the controversy continues, Jesus expands his teaching. Those who want to follow him and to receive the gift of life, must be in close union with what he says and does!

first reading: **Proverbs 9: 1 – 6**²

[Wisdom's Feast]

*Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn her seven pillars.(1)
She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.(2)
She has sent out her female servants; she calls
from the highest places in the town,(3)
"You who are simple, turn in here!"
To those without sense she says,(4)
"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.(5)
Lay aside immaturity and live,
and walk in the way of insight."(6)*

Proverbs hints that *'wisdom'* is not so hard to find that we cannot act wisely day-by-day; "*fearing the holy One*" and "*turning away from evil*". The writer hints that while not all wisdom is available to humankind, some is! That discernment of order is enough for nurture and life! For wisdom writers, the search for wisdom begins with, *'fear of the Lord'*.³ That means letting God be God and letting mystery define human life.

The way to understanding and wise living is to depart from evil and stay in the reality of the daily tasks of human community. "*Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil*".⁴ The role of wisdom in the Hebrew tradition is understood as the way responsible, reasonable knowledge of the world and passionate trust in the Lord God are held together. There is a, *'believing*

1 Cover Image: [Jesus the Bread of Life](#).

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 Pr.1:7

4 Pr.3:7

reason', or 'faith seeking understanding'. The wisdom writer answers the question of where wisdom is to be found. The Lord God is Wisdom. God, or Wisdom, is 'building a structure', 'preparing a feast', and 'issuing an invitation to searchers'. In other words, the object which contains wisdom is the world or the created order. For the wisdom-seeker, this requires fascination, imagination, patience, attentiveness to detail and finally – observation of the regularities which seem to govern the world.

The commentator, Von Rad, notes that wisdom expresses, *"faith in the similarity of people and of their reactions; faith in the reliability of the orders which support human life and thus implicitly or explicitly, faith in the Lord God who put these orders into operation"*.⁵ Life comes from the God of Creation's invitation and true understanding is given the experience of faithful living. In an adequate process of discerning wisdom, there can be no refusal to know, or think, or take responsibility. But there is also mystery. Life can't be reduced to matters of technical know-how! For the truly wise there is only reverence and praise before God's throne. In chapter 28 of *the Book of Job*; *"Then God saw her (Wisdom) and evaluated her, looked her through and through assessing her. Then God said to human beings, 'Wisdom? - that is fear of the Lord; Intelligence? That is avoidance of evil'"*.⁶

According to the wisdom writers, human wisdom begins and ends in *'fear of the Lord'*. Henry Nouwen made a journey to India to explore with Mother Teresa the clue to faithful living. Nouwen reasoned that if anyone would know the answer to his question it would be her. Faced with such a profound question her answer shocked him with its simplicity: *"Spend an hour with God each day and don't do anything you know is wrong"*.

response: Psalm 34 : 1 – 2, 9 – 14

[praise for deliverance from trouble]

*I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.(1)
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.(2) . . .
O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.(9)
The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.(10)
Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.(11)
Which of you desires life
and covets many days to enjoy good?(12)
Keep your tongue from evil*

5 Von Rad – *Wisdom* pp.62-63

6 *Job* 28:27-28

*and your lips from speaking deceit.(13)
Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.(14)*

The speaker calls to prayer those who have neither power, nor goods, nor access. In the struggle against the powers-that-be, the resourceless receive instruction about living the good life in a world in which the Lord God has placed them. The release of the power to new life is to be found in the freedom to develop and sustain the gift of a new social possibility. The subjects of this gift may or may not be good. The socially marginal ones – those who no longer expect the dominant society to help them – look to the Lord God as the alternative source of help (vv.8-14).

The cry of those with the power for life-giving, delegitimizes the structures that have reduced people to helplessness. They are responsible for re-shaping social life. The summons to a faithful life is a call to a revolutionary 'good' that is opposed to the 'evil-doers' who now order society (v.15)! The release to new life and a new direction for the faithful community is not just freedom from all that formerly oppressed them. Its freedom to engage in new-world building – a freedom to develop ways of acting which sustain the gift of the new social possibility made possible as the result of God's intervention. The teacher seems aware that if there is no consciousness of the Lord's activity and the responsibility to host and honour that action with new actions, then very soon the recently poor and afflicted will be back in the hopelessness of their old world. The liberative theme of God's gift (vv.1-7) is balanced by the theme of the new social responsibilities that fall on the receivers of the gift – the responsibility for new-world building (vv.8-14).

second reading: Ephesians 5: 15 – 20

[about giving thanks at all times]

*Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,(15)
making the most of the time, because the days are evil.(16) So do not be
foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.(17) Do not get drunk
with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,(18) as you
sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another, singing and
making melody to the Lord in your hearts,(19) giving thanks to God the
Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(20)*

The writer urges Christian disciples to be wise and cautious by making the most of their time, because the present is; difficult, challenging and demands wisdom (vv.15-16). What gives shape to Christian life is a continuing effort to discern the will of God (v.17). The goal of the good life for disciples, made possible by God through Christ, is a right relationship with God and a desire to understand and follow God's will. In contrast to the dissipation associated with

drunkenness (v.18), Christian disciples are encouraged to celebrate in psalms and song (vv.19-20). The last verse summarises much of what has already been said earlier.⁷ The idea of, '*being filled with the holy Spirit*,'⁸ and '*giving thanks to God in the name of Jesus*' is never out-of-date. Senseless, thoughtless and debauched actions, contradict the life-style of Christian disciples. To live intelligently or wisely, refers to the kind of wisdom cultivated in the Hebrew wisdom tradition – the orienting of one's values to those approved by the Lord God, rather than acquiring intellectual know-how!

That means living with God's commandments, pursuing the traits which make for peaceful and harmonious life and being attentive to God's wisdom. In the first century of the Christian era the opposite of thoughtlessness (v.17) would be self-possession, discipline, independence of the spirit and the will. For the Christian the wisdom that stands opposite to thoughtlessness is not one's own wisdom but that which stems from understanding God's will. The modern concepts of '*common sense*' and '*realism*' dictate certain kinds of behaviour defined by money, power and autonomy. These are some of the characteristics of '*so-called wisdom*' in the modern world. What the Scripture writer counts as '*wisdom*' runs in a totally different direction.⁹

gospel reading: John 6 : 51 – 58

[the Bread from Heaven]

Jesus said to the crowd, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."(51) The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"(52) So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.(53) Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day,(54) for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.(55) Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.(56) Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.(57) This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which the ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."(58)

John links the last meal Jesus had with his disciples and his words on that occasion,¹⁰ with the feeding of the crowd with bread and fish.¹¹ In the Synoptics, Jesus' words over the bread and wine: "*Take; this is my body – this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many*", sums up the meaning of the whole of his practice. He raises up hungry bodies. He announces the arrival of an

7 See Eph.1:3-14

8 Eph.5.18

9 [vv.15-16 & vv.19-20] The wording is similar to Col.4:5 and Eph.3:16-17.

10 Mk.14:22-25

11 Jn.6.11

empowering divine wisdom and the accompanying messianic feast that marks the reigning of God.¹²

Jesus had shocked his Israelite listeners earlier when he said that the manna of Moses wasn't true; "*bread from heaven*".¹³ He was saying that there isn't bread like that any more! For religious Israelites the Torah or Law, had become real food. Now Jesus says that he himself is the Word that replaces the manna which the Israelites linked with Torah! The only true bread that comes down from heaven is *the Word of love*. Jesus claims he is '*the true bread from heaven*' because he is God's Word.¹⁴ He is a victim too! His body and blood are offered in sacrifice for the life of the world.

The word '*flesh*' (v.15), suggests a link between the Eucharist and the Incarnation.¹⁵ The '*Word-made-flesh*' is the food of the people. The bread Jesus speaks about is love; of giving up self-interest and seeking union, or communion, or community. The Israelite/Christians among the first disciples, like Jesus' original audience, found this word hard to stomach! '*Flesh and blood*',¹⁶ was an Hebrew expression for the whole person. Jesus promises the power for life-giving to those who will, "*eat my flesh and drink my blood*"(v.56).

This promise follows the discussion on the bread of life earlier. Jesus insisted on the need to believe in him as God's messenger of liberation – that is – believe that Jesus is *the Word of God*. To have eternal life is to be in close communion with Jesus. Jesus is united with God and shares the life of God.¹⁷ Jesus insists on the genuine value of '*his flesh and blood*' as food and drink! The believer not only listens to Jesus' message – the external Word – but consumes it as real food and real drink; internalising the Word as food in the Sacramental action!¹⁸

When the disciples of Jesus share the Bread of the Eucharist, they share a real union with the body of Jesus and unite with the whole people with whom he is identified – and they unite with God! In another passage from John's gospel Jesus says eternal life, or resurrection, has already begun!¹⁹

The food that doesn't last, is like the word of a politician who make promises to win peoples' vote, but which aren't going to change peoples' misery. Jesus tells the Hebrew religious leaders that the miraculous food they had associated

12 Jn.6:51

13 Jn.6:32

14 Jn.6:32

15 Jn.1:14

16 Jn.6:53-54

17 See Jn.6:55-57

18 [vv.54-58] *Eats*: The verb used in these verses is not the classical Greek verb used of human eating, but that of animal eating: '*munch*', '*gnaw*'. This may be part of John's emphasis on the reality of the flesh and blood of Jesus (cf Jn.6:55), but the same verb eventually became the ordinary verb in Greek meaning '*eat*'.

19 Jn.11:25-26!

with the Torah, hasn't solved any of their problems.²⁰ Jesus, by his practice, is saying that believing the Word and consuming that Word as food and drink – is about changing the world by replacing the system of injustice, with a system of love!

for sharing:²¹

- *Wisdom's Feast. Comment on Proverbs 9 : 1 – 6*
About giving thanks at all times. Comment on Ephesians 5 : 15 – 20
- *The Bread from Heaven. Comment on John 6 : 51 – 58*

prayer:²²

*Wise and gracious God,
You spread a table before us
and nourish Your people with the Word of Life
and the Bread from heaven.
In our sharing of these holy gifts,
show us our unity in You
and give us a taste of the life to come.
We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

review:²³

We are sent, as a consequence of the Eucharistic action in our liturgy, to transform our world in ways that avoid trivialising and spiritualising the meaning of God's realm. Being involved in the promotion of the reigning of God means

²⁰ Jn.6:58

²¹ Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

²² The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

²³ The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

extending the communion experience beyond the Eucharistic community. The Christian virtue that expresses this response is the virtue of fairness. Fairness incarnates and extends the power for life-giving symbolised by the Eucharistic action of sharing, *'the Bread from Heaven'*.

In terms that are plain, this involves promoting economic equality and power-sharing: *'It seeks a relativity between one person's or group's gain, and another's loss Its about eliminating crippling effects from our relationships and our organisations; The vices that contradict communion-building are; market-thinking, which ignores externalities and makes efficiency an end rather than a means – and various forms of discrimination'*.²⁴ Matters of justice were not peripheral to a spiritual gospel, but were at the heart of Jesus' proclamation and practise.

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