

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH 11th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, WEEK 19 YEAR B,
12 AUGUST 2018

What draws people into the Christian faith? Various things. Family and upbringing may play an important part. It starts and continues as a way of life. Friends may have a similar influence, often during the formative teenage years. Sometimes events in people's lives bring them into contact with the church, or at least cause them to reflect on what life's about, and look for answers. They might have needs which are addressed by faith, usually within a community of faith. And there are a few people who just try to work out for themselves what they feel to be true, and find that Christianity has a ring of truth – though they might have also considered the claims of other religions, philosophies and lifestyles.

It's almost always a process over a period of time. 'Is it true? Does it work?' These are questions which won't be answered instantly. But today's gospel begins with Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." It is a bold statement and a striking promise. It seems obvious to us that Jesus is using hunger and thirst as symbols of the deeper needs he will satisfy. But it wasn't obvious to his hearers as described in S. John's gospel.

We're at week three of five weeks' readings from chapter 6 of S. John, the fourth gospel. Two weeks ago we read S. John's account of the feeding of the five thousand beside the lake, the inland Sea of Galilee. Then he crosses the lake by night. The crowd he's fed also make their way across in search of Jesus. They find him in Capernaum, a town on the north west side of the lake. That's where last week's gospel began, in which it becomes apparent that the people are hoping for another miraculous feeding. Jesus tries to move their desire from earthly food that perishes to the food he gives, that endures for eternal life. They will receive this food if they believe in him. They ask what sign he can give them, which is a bit rich bearing in mind what he'd done a day or so previously. They believe in Moses because he gave their ancestors manna, bread from heaven. It's an obvious parallel to draw, but they're still thinking of natural food. Then Jesus drops the bombshell: "I am the bread of life." That verse ended last week's gospel, and it is repeated at the beginning of today's.

We're so used to this title of Jesus that we don't find it surprising. We put it alongside the other titles from the fourth gospel – the light of the world, the true vine, the good shepherd – and we can miss how controversial they all are: what claims Jesus is making. In this case, Jesus uses the

symbol of bread, a basic universal food. We can readily understand that Jesus is as fundamental to eternal life as bread is to earthly life. But it's more specific than that. The people listening to Jesus knew they should live according to God's law given through Moses, often called by its Hebrew name, the *torah*. *Torah* also means 'teaching' – the law teaches people what they should do. So fundamental was the law, the *torah*, to the Jewish way of life, that rabbis likened it to bread. And a number of times in the Old Testament, God's word to his people is compared to bread. So when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," he is giving himself a status far greater than Moses. Jesus himself is God's word to people; he is divine teaching; he reveals God to them. It is the Father's will that people should come to him, Jesus, and believe in him. There is no greater work that they can do. Those who believe in him have eternal life. Jesus is challenging his hearers to make a radical change, no longer basing their lives on observing the law they've been taught, but basing their lives on following him.

At the end of today's reading, Jesus says, "...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Jesus is the bread of life because of his death and resurrection. The crowd could not be expected to make this connection, but we can. We can also make the natural link between Jesus as the bread of life and the bread of the eucharist, the mass, communion. Only in the last two verses does Jesus talk about eating the bread. There have been hints of the eucharist all along, but the main theme so far has been on who Jesus is – how he is the Father's message to the world. In next week's gospel the eucharistic theme will be prominent. Jesus will talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood – again ideas which his hearers will find difficult because drinking blood is totally forbidden by their law.

Jesus' death was undoubtedly horrific. That in itself was an expression of his love, indeed God's love, for sinful humanity. The Christian cannot stop at the physicality, however, but has to enter into the meaning of his death. "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh;" – a very similar statement to that at the end of our New Testament reading: "Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Feeding on Christ, the living bread, means we realise we are loved, we love each other, and we love those outside our fellowship, in imitation of Christ. We may have to change, maybe not as radically as those who heard Jesus beside Galilee, but only when we come closer to our Lord can we expect others to be drawn to him. Christ will become the bread of our life.