

Weekly Reflection - Pentecost 11B, 2021
Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35, 41-51

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Finding “food” for our journey

Debie Thomas, (Journey with Jesus) shares a story of food for her journey in a challenging time in her life:

I remember the huge pots of stew my parents brought to my house when I was recovering from childbirth — sore, hormonal, tired, and overwhelmed by my colicky newborn. “To build your strength back up,” my mother said each time she handed me a steaming bowl and insisted that I empty it. “Motherhood is a long journey. You need to be strong.”

Life is a long journey which requires “food” to sustain us, particularly in challenging times, and transitional times, such as we are experiencing in Parramatta Mission. What is this “food”?

Introduction

In our reading from John 6: 35, 41-51, John informs us that Jesus is the bread of life that nourishes more life. For John, Jesus nourishes us with a bread that produces abundant life. But it only truly nourishes because it originates from the generous being of God, the Word became flesh, “the fullness of a gift that is truth”, John 1:14.

Such nourishment that nourishes more life for all does not originate from human desires. It does not originate from our cultures and institutions, which can be driven by narrow, confused and self-seeking, interested power.

Last week we read that the crowds came to Jesus so that their hunger could be satisfied. And this was a legitimate, primary desire of Jesus, to feed the hungry. We cannot make this a secondary interest; this tears the Gospel apart, separating Jesus holistic engagement in all levels of life – loving neighbour with all their needs and loving God. But when Jesus shared that he could give them the bread of life, to feed a whole new way of being human, of thinking, feeling and acting, new values - an equally primary desire of Jesus - they could not understand what he was saying. Their view of what nourishes life and develops new and empowered identities was limited.

In our reading from John 6, we find another example of the human institutions seeking to control and reduce Jesus’ teaching. The “Jews”, those who held religious and social power, arrive and are sceptical and cynical about Jesus and his teaching. Their murmuring reflects the doubting Israelites in the Wilderness about God being with them. They try to discredit him by saying they know his mother and father, brothers and sisters, and attempt to infer his ordinary social status, and reduce his power.

Jesus responds by claiming that he is the bread of life because he comes from God, and to believe in Jesus is to share in eternal life, the life-giving gift of God. Eternal life here means a quality of life. As William Loader writes:

For eternal life is John's favourite way of describing salvation and it means sharing in God's life, for its benefits both for oneself and for others.

It is Jesus' presence, writes Raymond Brown (The Gospel of John, 269), that nourishes people. He goes on to say, "Jesus identifies himself with the bread from God, which nourishes people on their journey in the wilderness". And nourishes not just to allay physical hunger, but to transform human life to be truly human in the fullest sense.

How do we find "food" for our journey; strength for the journey of spirituality

In our Hebrew Scriptures, 1Kings 19:4-8, we find Elijah hiding in the wilderness, as Jezebel, with her political power, seeks to find and kill him in retribution for his prophetic acts. Afraid, defeated, he asks Yahweh to let him die! Alone, he falls asleep. Sleep, metaphorically, means denying reality and avoiding our needed journey of transformation. And into this socially isolated liminal space, which triggers anxiety, fear, isolation and denial, arrives the touch of an angel!

How beautiful! How delicate! How loving and other-centred! Devoid of judgement! Barren of criticism! Just generous invitation, desire to nourish: "Get up and eat." Elijah awakens to see that the angel has prepared "a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water," for him to eat and drink. Awakening movement from paralysis! It means seeing life from a different space, it means movement and preparation.

Elijah eats, but then lies down, still defeated. Transitioning from every liminal space takes time, patience, and ongoing support. We read in our text:

7 The angel of Yahweh came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." 8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

As Debie Thomas summarises:

Elijah is able to endure for forty days and forty nights on the nourishment of that one meal. Bread to carry. The angel feeds Elijah bread to carry. Bread for the road.

Bread for hope. Bread for the long haul that is life. Or as writer Lauren Winner describes it, "the bread that sustains oppressed people on their journey through dangerous terrain."

Nourishment to clothe ourselves with the new self

Our text in Ephesian 4:25 ff presents the issue of nourishment from a slightly different angle. But it is still about spirituality! About learning to live in the new relationship

released by and with Christ, the relationship in a culturally diverse community, and with ourselves as unique. And while it appears to be a set of rules, it is actually about a totally new way of being; about “clothing ourselves with the new self”! And only a new self can awaken us from the slumbers of the “old self”, of learning to live in right relationship with God, ourselves and our neighbours. It is not about a set of rules! It is about nourishment for the journey of transformation.

But we can be naïve about transformation, as Bill Loader reminds us:

if we concentrate only on the new state of being and expect changes, we are being naive. There is often a big time lag between inner change and outer change and for some people it lasts an eternity! People need help to make the connections.

The writer to the Ephesians boldly says in 4: 25, no more lies! This is what the term “falsehood” means in those translations which use it. Richard Rohr reminds us that “lies” are about uncovering how we deceive ourselves; that it is more about learning about who we are and how we live in the world; discerning those things that are not really our self. That we develop personalities that are mostly shaped by families and societies, when we accept and internalise the norms and values of one’s group and religion. We mostly have not had choices is so much of who we become. These influences shape our inner lives, populating them with voices and strategies, affecting our behaviour and character: like, “Always be nice and say thank you”; “ Don’t come close to me!”

Karen Horney, as social psychologist, discerned three different ways that people approach situations of anxiety and fear: Submission: giving in to other people, giving power away; Hostility: moving toward people with strength, aggression, power over others; Withdrawal: moving away, isolation. And later: four main ways to engage others and protect themselves from anxiety: Love, submissiveness, power, distancing. We come to believe that this is who we are.

Spirituality is an intentional process of awakening, is a touch of an Angel, of being fed for this journey of learning, to learn about our inner life and our behaviour, to discover our unhealthy patterns and “clothing ourselves with the new self”, accompanied by the Spirit of Truth. We are invited to ongoing conversion stages, to identify our “false” selves and and in this way to “clothe” ourselves with the new self, with a renewed inner life, thoughts, feelings, behaviours and relationships.

Of course, we need to seek practices that will assist our transformative journey. Many resources exist, like the Enneagram, which our ministry team can share with you.

Conclusion: Food for the journey of life

Debie Thomas shares

What provisions do you carry on your life journey? What do you depend on for nourishment when the going gets rough? Do you recognize the angels God sends

your way, their arms full of journeying bread? When they invite you to eat, do you accept their invitation?

... Jesus desires to sustain us in ours, to be our journeying bread for every road trip, every perilous ride, every long haul, every rocky path.

He desires to be our substance and our strength — not in some magical, cure-all way,

but in ways that meet us in our real lives, our real challenges, our real fears and griefs and hopes. Because Jesus knows better than anyone that the journey is hard. He knows it's too much for us to handle on our own. He knows we need bread that sustains. His bread. His flesh. "Given for the life of the world." Get up and eat.