

Last week our gospel reading ended 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.’*”

This week we hear his words again framing our gospel reading where Jesus expounds on what he means when he says that he is the Bread of Life, much to the skepticism of the crowd even as they begin to complain about his words.

Jesus ignores their complaints and gives it to them straight: no one gets to the Father except through him because he is the Living Bread that came down from heaven. We can understand the crowd’s skepticism because they know him as the carpenter’s son. Despite the miracle of the loaves and the fishes he is still one of them. He looks like them and he lives and works amongst them. They cannot even conceive of his claiming to be from heaven, or that he is the Son of the Father, or that they will receive eternal life through him.

We have another two weeks of what is called “Jesus’ discourse on the Bread of Life” so it is important that we explore the many dimensions of what Jesus is saying. Bread is so critically important to life. Bread was a fundamental life-sustaining substance then and then and it is now. God had fed the Israelites in the wilderness when he gave them manna that could be treated like flour. Unleavened bread was specified before the flight out of Egypt and is associated with Passover. Twelve loaves of bread called “the bread of the Presence” were set on a table in the tabernacle of the temple, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The bread was covered with frankincense, another sign that it was considered holy, and it was replaced each sabbath during which time it could only be consumed by the priests. So yes, bread had a very special place in Jewish culture. Moreover, if you have ever tried a low -carb diet you know how hard it is to give up bread.

But Jesus is saying that he is offering a different kind of Bread from Heaven, a living bread in the form of himself.

As Christians we accept this as a natural metaphor for what we receive in the Eucharist when we consume the bread and the wine, his body and blood. In addition, we also know Jesus as the Word of God. John’s gospel tells us *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life,...* (Joh 1:1-4 NRS) Although these may seem like unrelated images, Jewish mystics and scholars also interpreted manna as a spiritual substance, that bread was an allegory for the Torah, the teaching, the law, the ordinances, direction, and guidance that provided the true sustenance to those who studied it and lived by it. Bread has a spiritual as well as a physical dimension in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Bread from Heaven that God gave to the Israelites in the wilderness not only kept them alive it demonstrated their dependence on him – as would the Commandments, the teaching, that God gave to Moses, a teaching that was supposed to give them the best kind of life they could live. Psalm 119, all 176 verses of it, is a hymn of

praised to God's teaching, to the life that was promised to those who live in accordance with the Law "Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path. ...Your decrees are my inheritance forever; truly, they are the joy of my heart." (Ps 119 v 105, 111)

Therefore, proclaiming himself to be the Bread of Life Jesus is not as outlandish as it might seem. In declaring that he is not just a provider of physical nourishment, which he did when he fed the 5,000, he is declaring himself to be the one who is the true teacher, the one who brings people to God.

Jesus is the Word through which we read and hear and experience scripture. That's why we stand for the gospel. When we hear the gospel read during a Eucharist, we hear the Word of God and by that I don't mean the "words" of God as if scripture were written or dictated by God but that the Word is made present among us, much like in the prayer of the Great Thanksgiving makes Jesus present to us through the Holy Spirit. The gospel, and all that led up to it in our salvation history is nourishment for our souls. It teaches us, it guides us, it goads us, challenges us, and comforts us. The gospel is the lens through which we see the world as Christians and through which we learn that in Christ our lives are transformed.

Furthermore, we really must engage scripture, i.e., read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's Word, in order for it to provide real nourishment. Transformation doesn't usually happen by hearing 2-3 paragraphs a couple of times a month, or even every Sunday. Preaching helps us (or it should) to break open God's Word, to push us beyond the boundaries of our comfort zones, to reassure that God is fully present with us no matter the circumstances, to coach us in what God expects of us, and to remind us of the great sacrifice that was made by his Son in becoming one of us so that we might truly come to the Word Made Flesh and know what it means to have eternal life.

Amen