

## JESUS, OUR BREAD OF LIFE: 18<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY B

*'Food, glorious food ...!'* Among the most popular shows on television are those about food. *'Masterchef'*, *'My Kitchen Rules'* and Jamie Oliver's cooking demonstrations draw large TV audiences. Many more people than so-called *'foodies'* are drawn to them. The sheer number of fans tells me that there is a widespread and ongoing fascination with food – getting it, cooking it, and eating it. It's not that most of us live to eat. Rather, it's because we eat to live, and maybe just sometimes because we love to eat, that such shows are so appealing.

Over one hundred years ago, Nicolai Berdyaev, a Christian Russian philosopher, made this wise comment about bread: *'Bread for myself is a material matter; bread for other people is a spiritual matter.'* I think that just about sums up the attitude of Jesus too in his teaching today. Only the day before has he fed the people on the far side of the lake with more bread than they can eat. But they are not satisfied, for on the very next day they return to him at his base in Capernaum, expecting another generous hand-out. So he challenges them: *'You have seen,'* he says in effect, *'wonderful things. You have seen how the goodness of God enabled a big crowd to be fed. Your thoughts ought to have turned to the God who did these things. Instead, all you are thinking about is yourselves, and filling your bellies with bread.'*

His point was that they were interested only in physical satisfaction. On the famous ladder of human needs first identified by Abraham Maslow in 1943, they are clinging to the bottom rung of the ladder – bodily needs. But what about those higher needs higher up the ladder? How can a hearty meal and a full stomach replace e.g., belonging to others and being connected to others in loving relationships? Being approved, respected, and esteemed by others? Exploring, knowing and understanding the truth contained in facts and faith? Encountering and savouring order and beauty everywhere? And most of all realizing our potential to be everything we can be for the service of others and for a better world?

Most of all Jesus wants to lead these seekers (and ourselves as well) to *'work for the food that endures for eternal life'*, for the bread that lasts and which God is offering. Jesus spells out just what that food is. It's nothing less than a personal, interpersonal, life-giving and everlasting relationship with himself. He sums this up in powerful words, and especially in these:

1. *'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'* 2. *'Very truly, I tell you ... the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'* 3. *'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'*

His first hearers eagerly ask for this bread – *'always'*, they say – but they don't understand what this bread really is. Jesus, the man standing before them, is himself the bread. In the way he lives, loves and dies for them, they are meant to see the face of God, entering into an intimate relationship with them.

Surely this gospel speaks strongly to us as well. But it also reminds us that there is some difference between knowing Jesus personally and simply knowing about him. To know Jesus

personally is to respond to his person and message, to share our lives with him, to follow him, and as a result, to change our lives and become better people, more human and humane people. This is the knowledge that involves an experience of his presence, friendship with him, trust and prayer.

But the knowledge which comes from an interpersonal relationship with him gives rise to a desire, and perhaps even a yearning and a hunger, to know more about him, to learn more about his beliefs, values, and how he lived his life. Faith in him, then, is a matter of both the head and the heart. When we hear or read about him, we also expect to meet him in the voices we hear and in the pages we read. But we do not seek a Jesus hidden behind the texts but a Jesus shown to us inside the texts, and most especially in the selected Readings about him Sunday after Sunday at church.

But the challenge remains to keep discovering how this great man from the distant past is also in significant ways one of us, and therefore very real and relevant. So much so, that as the song from the stage show *Godspell* has it, a song that echoes the prayer of St Richard of Chichester, we would want to keep praying for three things. These three, as the song puts it, are to '*see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day*'.

Let's stay with that challenge!

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