

HOMILY 21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Jn 6.63-68

Josh 24.1-2, 15-18

Eph 5.21-32

Welcome to another virtual Mass as lockdown continues indefinitely. It could hardly be said to have been a good week, particularly given the unfolding tragedies in Afghanistan and Haiti, and then the ongoing coronavirus crisis in NSW, and the uncertainty here in Victoria. Let's remember all in prayer, gathered in faith, seeking patience and perseverance for ourselves also. Once again, it's good to have you join us in spirit as we celebrate Eucharist.

It has not been an easy time for any of us, but again we need to remind ourselves of the positives, given that spring is coming, the wattle is out, the flowers are starting to bloom, we are able to get out for a walk in a pleasant environment, and we have more time to spend at home with family, although I guess that can be more than a bit challenging, when you have to balance work, on-line learning and the usual domestic chores. It we look at the broader picture of our world, we can be appreciative that we are in a relatively safe and free place, notwithstanding current restrictions, isolation and curfews! So let's be thankful for who and what we have, and what we can still do.

And at least we have phones and social media for communication, and vaccines to move us to eventual freedom from the current situation. In a fractured and fragile world, we are reminded of our part to play in it, and make it a better place, each in our own way.

Today's Gospel concludes John's discourse on Jesus as the Bread of Life, after the weekend celebrations of Mary MacKillop and Assumption, following Jesus' responding to the physical needs of the crowd gathered to hear him. It's not all that straightforward, however, as some are disconcerted or disturbed by Jesus' words, and can't take the next step forward in faith. It has been suggested that this is also a reflection of division occurring in the early Christian communities, with the human realities of persecution, desertion and misunderstanding playing a part in the problems being faced as the Gospel message was proclaimed and lived. Faith ultimately has to be a choice and not imposed, so there is freedom to accept or reject his message of revelation.

Human nature is a funny thing, when you look at it. Different perspectives and personalities lead to misunderstanding and division all through history. Look at the various branches of Christianity that have evolved since the time of Jesus, the diverse forms of Judaism and Islam. Then, within our own Catholic tradition, we could look at the Franciscans, who split into two groups after Francis died, and later into three, whilst Mary MacKillop's Josephites ended up as two varieties, black and brown, during her lifetime. The conclusion could well be that diversity is a wonderful thing, and that we need to accept it and live with it, as long as there is respect and freedom, with a concern for the common good of all, which is why we are where we are at the moment.

The Catholic focus on Eucharist, from which we are currently deprived, has had a chequered history through the centuries. It took until 1215 for the Lateran Council to define Transubstantiation, which might better be described as '***Real Presence***' from our understanding in faith. It derives from Jesus' description in the giving of himself to us as real food and drink, in terms of spiritual nourishment for our faith journey in life.

There were times, however, in history, where this understanding became distorted in that Communion became something that was too sacred for the ordinary sinner, and the emphasis became more on adoration than reception. From the intimate early church gatherings for Eucharist as described by Paul, the early centuries reflected communal participation.

But, with the formalizing of ritual and gathering in faith, Alfred McBride talks about affecting practice, with the chaos breaking down communities with the collapse of the Roman Empire, the tendency to see oneself as unworthy as a sinner, and the evolution of an exaggerated separation between priests and people.

You may have read that only recently Pope Francis has issued an instruction titled ***Traditiones custodes***, in which he expresses his wish to curtail celebrations of Mass in the pre-Vatican II Tridentine Rite, which dates from the Council of Trent around 1570, slightly updated in 1962, just prior to Vatican II, called by Pope John

XXIII, in order to open the windows, as he put it, and to engage the Catholic Church's rituals and teachings more directly, in communicating with the modern world.

At the start of Vatican II, when I was about to turn 10, it was hardly thinkable to most, that Mass would ever be celebrated other than in Latin, but the first document issued, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, moved towards the local language being used for liturgical worship. I can just remember the old days of Latin, and Mass back to the people, but when I look back, I see the reforms as necessary and effective. Rather than read the right hand (or was it left hand) side of the Missal or Mass book I had received from my godmother for my baptism in November 1952, I could understand what was being said and respond likewise. It just made sense for the community present to be more actively involved.

Yet, some wish to cling to the past, claiming we've lost a sense of the sacred, and that the more mystical side of worship was lost with the changes. To me, it's a false nostalgia, where the need to engage the community gathered is critical, as our worship should reflect what we believe and can understand, accepting the mystery of faith. Surely our active participation in worship makes more sense than being mere observers, remotely, while the priest runs a one man band (*although we're a bit stuck with that at the moment!*).

In brief, it has taken until Vatican II, for the emphasis to be on regular reception of Eucharist, whenever Catholics attend Mass, so that there is a more balanced understanding of full participation and reception, as it is *'Bread for the Broken'*, as Frank Moloney SDB titles it, in his book on the Eucharist. We probably appreciate it more now that we have experienced long term deprivation of the Bread of Life, at the heart of our Eucharistic celebration of faith.

john hannon

22nd August 2021