

It seems to me that when I was young, there was only two kinds of bread. Brown bread and Wonder Bread. Brown bread was what we got most of the time. It was ordinary. It was nutritious (I suppose) - a suitable companion for peanut butter and cheese whiz. Wonder bread (always white - always soft and fresh - was the thing of my dreams; a special treat. Bread has come a long way in my lifetime. Now, every grocery store has a bakery. Every bread aisle is full of variety. Bread has become more than just an afterthought - bread is back in the spotlight. I've learned, by baking bread myself, that bread has character - each loaf is an adventure.

So there's bread - the everyday stuff of breakfast, lunch and supper - and then there's bread; the essence of life. The gift from God. This according to Jesus in the sixth chapter of John's gospel. You think you know what bread is - but you don't. You think you know what it is to be satisfied...to be fed...to be complete...but you don't.

You could be forgiven if, upon hearing today's gospel lesson, you imagined that the table should be set for communion. Jesus' argument offers sound sacramental logic. We are meant to be transported to the table when we hear the words "I am the living bread..." this talk of body and blood from Jesus is provocative in every age.

A stumbling block to the Jews (says Paul) - and sure enough, John's gospel recalls the horror expressed by faithful Jews upon learning that Jesus' disciples share a memorial meal that symbolizes Jesus' death. "This is my body...this is my blood..." Putting aside cultural prohibitions about cannibalism, blood is life, and there are specific religious restrictions on spilling or consuming blood.

You might wonder if I'm taking liberties...reading too much into this...but remember that John's gospel is the 'newest' of the four gospels. Nearly a century has passed since Jesus walked the earth. The staunch band of disciples who met the risen Jesus have, through several generations, grown into a movement that is now separate from the Jewish faith. The stories they tell about their past will point proudly to the things that set them apart from their Jewish roots. Differences of opinion with Pharisees and Sadducees take centre stage in the fourth gospel. John is the most theologically confident of the gospels - full of nuance and rhetoric - full of Jesus giving speeches like this one. For there are gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - telling the story with an emphasis on events; and then there's GOSPEL - John; poetic and mysterious and full of a particular kind of majesty.

Gospel is our version of an old English word meaning good story, or good news. We apply it now to the stories of (and the teachings of) Jesus, but also generally to anything that we believe to be true and beneficial. There's gossip, and then there's gospel. All four of the gospels that we find in the Bible tell the story of Jesus, but John's gospel does stand apart. There's bread, and then there's BREAD.

Jesus' argument here in chapter six is full of history and memory. It calls to mind the Exodus - that pivotal story in the history of God's relationship with the children of Abraham. The bread from heaven - the manna that was found only in the morning, and in strangely specific quantities (gather only what you need - keep none for tomorrow {except over the Sabbath}) - this bread was miraculous, and life-sustaining. The people of God ate this bread for forty years in the wilderness (so the story goes) and the supply of bread ended when they crossed the borders of the promised land.

God, not Moses, gave your ancestors this bread (says Jesus) - and they died. That miracle - the miracle of manna - is history, and so are the people that experienced it. I offer you (says Jesus) a miracle for your time and for all time. I am the living bread...the bread that came down from heaven...the bread of life.

If you are in the market for a miracle, which would you prefer: that God offer a sign, or that God comes in person? John's gospel, which opens with a poem praising the incarnation - the appearance of the Word made flesh - is full of images of Incarnation. And this is one of those.

John's purpose is to explain what it means to stand in the presence of God - to live in the company of divinity. Jesus' daring declaration puts flesh on divine history. A well known story of God's providence - manna from heaven - suddenly stands in front of a skeptical crowd. 'God gives life and I am life, so...' the obvious conclusion is that God is before you. This is the blasphemy that we call revelation. This is the difficult metaphor that we understand as Incarnation; God-with-us. And Jesus goes even further, in John's gospel, daring to suggest that we can have what He is. He is the bread that gives us real life - eternal life. Not just God-with-us, but God-within-us. Incarnation that is contagious - a gift of God that is to be shared and experienced and which cannot be contained in one historical (or theological) moment.

There's bread - the stuff that quiets our hunger, and then there's BREAD - the food that fills us and strengthens us and gives us all we need. The metaphor comes from the one who challenges us to see him as more than a man. For there is Jesus, gentle meek and mild; teacher and healer, and friend of the oppressed, and there is JESUS - the Word made flesh; the Light of the world; Son of God; Lord of Lords. Miracle and mystery both - and still he invites us to taste and see that God is good.