

August 4, 2024 (Trinity 10) – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: Ex 16.2-4, 9-15; Ps 78.23-29; Eph 4.1-16; John 6.24-35

‘Bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.’ It is a wonderful line from that very famous, originally Welsh hymn we just sang. A hymn that in Wales and in the wider UK has even made it into rugby and football stadiums. Though that is probably more due to the rousing melody than to its beautiful lyrics which are mostly changed into something else by the football fans. Lyrics that express our best possible response to the Gospel reading in a very apt way: ‘Bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore’. It echoes also the response of the crowds around Jesus ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’. It is this desire to desire to not only be fed by the many good things we can find here on earth. But also to be nurtured in a spiritual, religious way, by our connection to God who feeds us directly with ‘bread from heaven’. Earthly food in all its many diversity, literally and also metaphorically, just isn’t enough for us humans. As Jesus himself quotes the Hebrew Bible, when tempted in the wilderness: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ Shall not, but also does not really want to. All of us have this desire, this higher aspiration, this need to find a different purpose in life, to connect to what goes beyond ourselves and the world we live in. We can see how natural this is, when we look at the way in which in particular children find such an easy access to religion, or to put it broader to spirituality. That’s why it is such an enormous tragedy that parts of our education system and the broader society tends to be so hostile towards this natural drive and desire to be fed with heavenly food as well. From a young age, many children are taught to suppress such desires. Taught to regard them as indeed just childish. To grow up and accept a so called scientific or atheist worldview that blocks out all the supernatural, the transcendental, that leaves no room for a believe in God. There is quite some empirical research, showing that suppressing the spiritual aspect of children and youngsters turns out to be in fact harmful for their mental health and well-being. We simply are religious beings who cannot do without bread from heaven. But where to find it? How to know if what is on offer to us, is indeed truly healthy. Bringing us and our communities the fruits that we long for. Fruits that will last.

We can see this constant struggle of mankind of course in the stories from the Bible. Starting with Adam and Eve in paradise, looking for the kind of fruit that will be truly good for them and of course not quite succeeding in finding it as they dismiss the right guidance that was available to them from their Creator God. But God continues to offer his guidance, especially to a particular people in a very particular way. Hoping that through them, he will in the end reach out to the whole world with his great offer of divine love.

Again, this proves to be not an easy route. So we hear from Exodus how the people are led to freedom out of slavery, but ended up in the wilderness. More than ever longing for all kinds of food. Feeling vulnerable and dependent on God’s providence more than ever. We can relate to this situation of course, especially when we also find ourselves in any kind of wilderness. Which in itself is a good place to get in touch with our deepest longings and desires and to awaken and deepen our desire for a deep relationship with God, channelled by a healthy and fruitful religion and religious community. Especially in the wilderness we tend to look up for heavenly food, the bread of heaven. In our first reading we see how the people of Israel received it. Not just manna, something to fill their stomach, but also the Law, to guide their hearts and minds towards a purposeful life and a deeper connection to God, the Creator of all.

The crowd that meets Jesus in Capernaum is still aware of those signs from the past, as they have continued to read the book we call Exodus and the Psalms such as Psalm 78. Now they have witnessed another strong sign, linked to the desire for food. Jesus feeding thousands by multiplying

just five loaves and two fishes, the day before. And here they are again looking for Jesus, in order to receive more. What exactly do they want, what is their desire? Jesus taps into this, by pointing them towards the need to foster a desire for food that remains. Food that is connected to a life eternal, life in all its fullness. Not just a desire for instant satisfaction of our physical needs. That desire for the things beyond that is inside all of us. And we read how the crowd indeed expresses that desire that he has fanned in them. First of all by eagerly looking for him on the other side of the lake, in a place called Capernaum. When they meet him, they show their drive to perform the works of God. They express a desire to receive more signs to strengthen their faith. And when he tells them that he offers them the kind of food that they deeply desire, because he himself is the bread of life, they give the best expression of what they want: 'Sir, give us this bread always.' And that brings us back to the line from that hymn we just sang: 'Bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.'

So this Sunday, we hear once more that the best way to satisfy our deepest longings is to always turn to Jesus. Maybe we have to cross the lake every now and then to encounter him in new and surprising ways. But we can be sure that looking for him will always lead to a more fulfilled life, in fact life eternal. So let us continue to focus our desire on meeting him, staying as close to him as possible. On this day by gathering here in this place, we meet him in those wonderful words of his, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty'. We meet him also in the blessed sacrament. The bread and wine as the most holy signs of his lasting presence among and even within us. It is only in him that we can find the fulfilment of our deepest longings, not just today but in all eternity, singing, indeed praying: 'Bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.' Amen