

**A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
at St. John's Church, Norwood Parish
13 August 2006**

Propers 14B: Deuteronomy 8:1-10; John 6:37-51

You may have noticed that I substituted the word "some" for "the Jews" in my reading of the Gospel today. In John's account of the Gospel, our patron, John the Evangelist, typically uses the term "the Jews" as a sort of pronoun, a collective term, for those who are opposing Jesus, for those who are suspicious of Jesus, for those who doubt the truth of Jesus' word, for those who doubt that Jesus is the Word. The Prayer Book allows for the replacing of pronouns in scripture readings with the appropriate antecedent; here the antecedent is not obvious. The reading begins with Jesus talking to "the people." So, it is misleading to think that there were "the people" and then there were "the Jews" who are all questioning Jesus identity. This is misleading, because of course, Jesus was not talking to anyone but Jews. Jesus was himself a Jew and his ministry was to Jews; whenever Jesus talks to non-Jews, as to the Samaritan woman or to Gentiles, this is made very clear. It is also misleading, because to identify as "the Jews" those who doubted Jesus statement that he had had come from heaven, is to make these folks different from us, to make their predicament different from ours. And that won't do, because these are just some rational, clear-thinking folks like us; some folks like you and me who don't want to be conned by a charlatan.

These folks know who Jesus is, they know his father Joseph, (although John doesn't tell us, they probably also know his mother Mary) and they know Joseph's parents, Jesus' grandparents, as well. And these folks know what bread is, and as far as they can see Jesus is not bread; Jesus is a fully human person just like them – just like us. They may have understood Jesus perfectly well; they just did not like what he was saying. Of course for those first hearers, if Jesus could continue to feed them all as he had managed on the hillside -- that they could understand and accept. And if, based on his ability to feed their physical hunger, Jesus would be their king, subdue their enemies and restore their sovereignty over the land -- that they could understand and accept. But Jesus is neither the chief of provisions nor their king-army-and-homeland security provider all in one package. Jesus tells them, and us, he is in charge of none of the things which will pass away in this life. Oh he has provided for them, and shown them that -- just like the people in the wilderness who had food, clothes and footwear to sustain them -- they have everything they need if they would use well the resources entrusted to them.

No, Jesus says, he is neither the chief of provisions nor the commander-in-chief. Instead Jesus refers to himself as the bread that can sustain them and us in this

life and into the life to come. Well, that is pretty shocking stuff! His hearers are aghast that Jesus seems to be saying that the "Promised Land" is a perishable commodity – although their history seems to have made that rather obvious; Jesus seems to be saying that instead of stuff which is perishing, Jesus can provide food which does not perish. Now let's be honest, why would a rational, salt-of-the-earth, common-sense-thinking Jew want to trade in the goal of Moses and the children of Israel for something as insubstantial and ephemeral as "bread which comes from heaven?" In fact, why would we?

Such a radical re-centering of our lives upon Jesus as the Bread of Life cannot be accomplished by human effort, and Jesus recognizes that; indeed, centering our lives on the promise of God's abiding presence through the Bread of Life which does not fail, can only be accomplished by the grace of God. Instead of centering our lives on a promised geographic homeland, Jesus offers himself as a promised homeland of the spirit. Jesus suggests that the geographic land and the bread made from its grain cannot satisfy the true hunger and thirst of this life. For a center that will last; for a center that will offer meaning, purpose and direction, then we want our lives to be centered on bread which will last -- bread which will carry us from this life into the next. To receive this bread, we have only open our hands.

Now let's think about bread. What does bread mean to you? If you are like my mother, you like your bread dark, with lots of texture and as many different grains as possible, and maybe seeds of various sorts; she thinks that Garrison Keillor's "Raw Bits" made with oat hulls and wheat chaff sounds pretty good. Is that your favorite sort of bread? Or, does your bread need to have been baked in a proper bread pan, with a golden brown crust broken just so? Or could it be flat – either having risen or not -- bread which works more like a tortilla doing triple duty as spoon, plate and meal all in one. That is the kind of bread Jesus knew. Or perhaps you are – like children of any age – still fond of white bread – the whiter and smoother the better – maybe with crusts cut away to make it totally uniform; bread made of wheat so refined that it turns to sugar as soon as it enters your mouth?

But perhaps you think of bread with a bit of symbolic sensibility. Could bread for you include home and family, your career or this country of ours? Does bread for you encompass the good material things of this life which bring joy and ease to you? To us? All these things are important, and we need them all. God knows that, and has provided them, and the resources we need to create them, sufficiently for the needs of all to be met. The problem is a human one; how we manage the resources entrusted to us. As we hoard these good things, they become idols; as we allow them to be the center and focus of our lives, our capacity to see that the needs of all are met becomes distorted. And so there is inequity in the distribution of the gifts of creation; and that inequity can become

so severe that it leads to desperation and despair. The groundwork is laid then for those who say to the dispossessed that they can meet both the peoples' immediate needs, and their fundamental need for meaning and purpose in their lives. What else can explain the success of Hezbollah with the disenfranchised Shi'a community in southern Lebanon, or of Hamas with the Palestinians, or of insurgents in Iraq, or of the Taliban in Afghanistan? And the list goes on. What else can explain the miscalculation of the American and Israeli governments in thinking that overwhelming force can stop suicide bombers; "smart missiles" cannot stop those abused into thinking that suicide will give meaning to their lives -- including those of whom we learned this week, planning to make their bombs on airplanes in flight.

The basics of this life - food, shelter, meaningful work, significant relationships, and the good things of this life - are all important, but they cannot bear the weight of being our life's center. Only God, can bear that weight. That is why we need to understand, and tell the story about Jesus as the Bread of Life who gives meaning, purpose and direction to life; with Jesus as the Bread of Life sustaining us in this life and the life to come, then we can enjoy all the other basics of this life for what they are. This is not just some pious, spirituality, divorced from the nitty gritty of this life. How else to explain the boredom of five young men in our city, who - we learned this week - thought that a good way to invest their time would be to rob and assault tourists on the National Mall? These five young men apparently don't know that material things and the pleasures of the moment cannot sustain them.

Jesus knows about the brokenness of this life; he lived with our brokenness, and died a broken man on the cross. The powers of this world would not accept the Bread of the Kingdom he brought near, and they killed him. And so, he gave, and continues to give his very self to be consumed by us as bread.

Thus Jesus, who is the Bread of Life, can restore to life its center - can restore to life purpose, meaning and direction. This is not a spirituality divorced from the physical reality of our lives; this is a spirituality grounded in the physical realities of our lives. The Bread of Life shapes our way of being in the world -- our ability to love, to trust and to have hope.

This is the story that John wants us to know and share with one another, with all who are drawn here, with those five young men of our city, and with people of every nation in this broken and hurting world. Amen.

Harrison West+