



Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 1 August 2021

READINGS

2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Youth and child headed households

Every three years, the lectionary leads us spend five long weeks in John's Gospel, contemplating themes of emptiness and fullness, hunger and nourishment, Christ and bread. In the Gospel of this Sunday, Jesus describes himself as "the bread of life," or "the bread which comes down from heaven." The people whom Jesus fed (the 5000) were hungry once again. Since Jesus had fed them the day before, they were looking for more. It is important to note that Jesus had crossed the lake in the night so this group decided to get into boats themselves and find him. When they do find him they go back to the original question—what sign are you going to give to get our allegiance. Jesus, of course, sees through the ruse. They really don't want a sign. They want bread. Bread was the staple of life.

As is often the case in John, Jesus turns the physical into the spiritual. The people want bread—like the bread Moses provided in the wilderness (though truth be told the people got tired of manna and asked for an expanded menu)—but Jesus had another kind of bread in mind. He told the people that it wasn't Moses who gave the people bread, it was God. Now God would offer them bread, just a different kind of bread—the bread of life. That promise leads to another request: show us that bread. Jesus answers: "I am the bread of life."

In this biblical text of the Gospel of John, Jesus issues an invitation that is far more intimate and provocative when he calls himself our bread. He invites us to eat him. Eat him, and never be hungry again. It is imperative that we understand this passage and other frequent Scripture references to hunger and poverty in the Gospels (such as the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount)— that these are specifically addressed to people who are poor, disenfranchised, hungry, and miserable.

Therefore, the Gospel reading from John is about justice as it is about holiness: providing all the people with our daily bread, and satisfying our spiritual hunger with "the food that remains unto life eternal." The Church puts these readings together in our lectionary to suggest to us that there is a connection between the 'justice' issue of hunger and the 'holiness' issue of the Eucharist. The work of God is to feed, and if we should want to join in that work, we must become active and practical providers, doing all we can to see that no one goes hungry and to bring people to the Eucharistic table of the Lord. Many persons today are physically hungry. Certainly the solution to starvation and malnutrition requires increased production and improved distribution of food. But it also requires a concerted act of solidarity by communities of faith and the nations of the world. Whenever we share in the Eucharist we are inspired to such solidarity, as well as being nudged to actively express such solidarity in works of charity and mutual help.

Nelson Mandela was known to have said many things that have remained pearls of wisdom for the entire world. One of those pearls of wisdom recalls his understanding of compassion: He once said: "Our human compassion binds us the one to the other – not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our

common suffering into hope for the future.” Nelson Mandela. I am often struck by the lessons we learn as we journey deeper into God’s realm or kingdom. As we learn more about God, we often find that the answers to the questions we have, don't necessarily get clearer, but rather we discover new depth and nuance, sometimes even contradiction. Some parts of Scripture comfort us, and others make us feel deeply uncomfortable, in the same way that the people in John’s Gospel were befuddled by Jesus’ statement to move them from thinking about physical bread to spiritual nourishment.

This perhaps, is as a result of the dissonance between our understanding of faith and the way we practice it. In faith we believe in the infinite goodness and love of God for all human beings and that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God, but in our everyday relationships, we find ourselves at odds with one another, perhaps because we fail to see the divinity of God in one another – instead we are prone to discriminate, to putting barriers which define who is in and who is out - based on factors such as nationality, class, gender, race, culture & religion.

During this month of August, we are called to demonstrate our compassion to those in our society who are vulnerable and excluded. August, which is also a month dedicated to women in our country, is a time when we are challenged to turn our eyes towards sectors of our society which consist of those who are just as vulnerable: immigrants, migrants, refugees and poor and unemployed and asylum seekers. Today, in the backdrop of the Gospel theme of the bread of life we turn our focus on vulnerable youth and those young people heading poor households. Among the vulnerable poor, these are those without enough: not enough food, water, medicine, shelter, education, family or community — those with no power to provide for or protect themselves.

What are Child-headed households? According to the University of Cape Town’s Children’s Institute, Child-headed households are commonly defined as households where all members are under 18 years. An analysis of the 2006 General Household Survey found 0.67% of children living in child-headed households. This is equivalent to roughly 122 000 children out of 18.2 million children in South Africa. This number would have grown due to the impact of COVID. Most child-headed households have between one and three members. Children in child-headed households live in conditions that are on average worse than those in mixed-generation households. Child-headed households are at risk of having to cope not only without adults, but also with poorer living conditions than other children. They lack regular income from earnings and social grants, and are disproportionately located in non-urban areas, where service delivery is poor – mainly in the Provinces of Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape. This is but a snapshot of one group of an often forgotten group in our society. So that we bring into sharp focus, the plight of those vulnerable young leaders of households.

In our Gospel passage, Jesus tried to connect the people’s physical hunger back to their spiritual hunger and encouraging them to realize that the two cannot be separated. After all, what good are “signs” if one is physically hungry and what good is eating if one is spiritually wanting? Encountering Christ recognizes that we are called to feed the world both physically and spiritually. We can neither concentrate on just the physical nor can we over-spiritualize the basic need of the human body for physical food. We are called to be the “signs” of Christ’s presence in the world. We are called to be sacrament in this world.

Today we are called and equipped to make a difference in the darkest places in this world — even in places where many of us are perhaps tired to look at. As children of God we have his nature in us, and that means we all have at our disposal an incredible power called COMPASSION. Compassion in within us, fuelled by the Holy Spirit, will give us the desire, the courage, the strength and the perseverance to sacrificially serve the poor. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

When we labour for human rights, when we contribute to the well-being of the poor, when we care for the sick, when we protect the homeless, when we reach out to the criminal, we do these things not as activists or social workers. We do them not as liberals or conservatives. We do them as people who worship the incarnate God. The God who comes to us in the form of bread and wine.