What kind of bread do you want?

I’m sure you, like me, conjure up lots of good images when you think of bread! Bread is one of the staple foods in our western culture and diet and really, what can be nicer than fresh, warm, wholesome bread – it smells good and tastes great and good bread is always immensely satisfying! And what a choice we have - so many kinds of bread. We know too that some kinds of bread are more satisfying, more nourishing than others. Some bread looks appealing and satisfies for a while. Other loaves are more dense and nutritious and they feed us in a more substantial way.

I’m thinking about bread this week because the Gospel text for last Sunday’s Mass (Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B) was all about bread. Bread features significantly in Scripture and some of those key moments in our Judaeo-Christian story are: the unleavened bread of the Passover, first eaten by the Israelites as they prepared to leave Egypt; then there is the bread in the desert - God ‘rained down bread from heaven’ to nourish the Israelites in their forty – year wilderness wandering; there is the multiplying of the five loaves of bread to feed the 5000 hungry people who followed Jesus to hear him teaching; and of course, the breaking of bread by Jesus at the Last Supper – and there are numerous references to that in the Christian Scriptures. But the text from John’s Gospel read on Sunday, invites us into an important reflection on bread, a real considering of the kind of bread we want, and just how we might get that bread.

Sunday’s passage follows the story of the feeding of the five thousand. A crowd of people, riding on the wave of euphoria because of what had just happened, what they had just been given so unexpectedly, set out to seek Jesus who had gone away quietly with his disciples. They got into boats and crossed the Sea of Galilee and found him in Capernaum. And then Jesus said to them:

*I tell you most solemnly, you are not looking for me because you have seen the signs but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat. Do not work for food that cannot last, but work for food that endures to eternal life, the kind of food the Son of Man is offering you, for on him, the Father, God himself, has set his seal. Then they said to him, ‘What must we do if we are to do the works that God wants?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. ‘Sir’, they said, ‘give us that bread always’. Jesus answered, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; He who believes in me will never thirst’.*

John 6: 24 – 35

Jesus’ words to these people who had sought him out were challenging, and I’m sure they would have shocked and confused them, perhaps even offended them. They had been fed and now came looking for more. What they had tasted was good for them, it satisfied them there and then. But Jesus tells them that they had really missed the point! When he fed them he was really pointing to,
and hoping they would see and desire, another kind of food, another way of living. He came to them where they were, saw their hunger, and offered them the bread only he can give.

It may seem like a cruel challenge to these people – after all, they really thought they were onto something good there. But isn’t it true! Isn’t there something in human nature which drives us to want and to seek out that which is immediately gratifying to us, that which makes us comfortable and feels good. ‘Give us more’, we say. But those people 2000 years ago, just like us today, were set off on a journey. They were tipped out of their comfort zone and offered something much more substantial.

The bread we think we want to feast on can take many forms in our lives. These are the things we think we need and that we so often seek out, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously too. The obvious things that come to mind are money, wealth of all kinds, expensive cars, bigger and better houses in the right location, the latest of anything available that is a ‘must-have’. It’s an endless list really and is fuelled by the promises that advertisers attach to these things, and the offers of ways to get them – and get them now.

But there is also another kind of bread we may seek out – not so obvious as those overtly material things – but leading us on nonetheless. I am thinking of things like affirmation, approval, prestige, esteem by others, the need to always be right, to always have the last word, the need to move up the slippery ladder of promotion and success, the need to be noticed – again another endless list. And the pursuit and need of these things may be something we are not even aware of and certainly do not consciously admit. Even more hidden, but nonetheless driving us on, are things such as feeling good about ourselves when we do good, or that ‘martyr’ attitude when we go out of our way and give up what we want in order to accommodate someone else. Yes, these things can become addictive because they are ‘feel-good’ moments.

These things all constitute the bread that we think will satisfy us. They give a sustenance of sorts. And they may satisfy us for a while. But they will never satisfy us completely or ultimately. They pass away. They may come and go and ultimately they leave us. And even as we pursue them we find the hole just gets bigger – we want more and more – they are not satisfying. And they will certainly leave little or no room for the bread we really need, the bread that will last.

When we really engage with the words and teachings of Jesus, all these layers of needs and desires will surface - all these things we must face and purify.

Jesus offers us another kind of bread. So what might this bread be? And how will it ultimately satisfy us?

The bread Jesus offers us and tells us to work for are things like selflessness, love, justice, forgiveness, compassion, understanding, humility, graciousness, simplicity, wisdom, inclusiveness, strength to resist wrongdoing, the hunger for what is right and good, concern for the poor, willingness to have less, not being afraid to be ‘little’, not being afraid to be considered unsuccessful by society’s standards - all those things he taught about and modelled in his own life.
We’re all familiar with these teachings. But this is where the real spiritual journey begins – we must make all this deeply part of our lives and our attitudes. The invitation to us is to desire only this bread! And this is where a really challenging but beautifully life-giving spiritual path opens up for us.

If we want this bread we have to do two things: we have to both work for it by actively choosing these ways of being, and we also have to let go. We have to say ‘no’ to, and let go of, our pursuit of the other kind of bread. So for example, to forgive, we may have to let go, not only of grudges and hurt but also the desire to be right or to mete out our own kind of justice. To be compassionate and understanding we have to let go of seeing our perspective as the only one, the right one. To be successful in working for justice we may have to forego other kinds of success. To give, to enable others to live a little better, we may have to be a little worse off. And isn’t this where it gets hard, because the other kind of bread just seems so immediately satisfying! And after all, isn’t everyone wanting it and pursuing it! Well, that’s what we’re so often told.

It is one of the great paradoxes of Christian spirituality that the poorer we become, the richer we are; the more we surrender our needs and wants, the more we are enabled to be open to God. Those who lose their life for my sake will find it, said Jesus (Luke 9:24). Jesus himself reveals this to us, not only in his words, but because in his life and death we see this paradox at work. His utter self-giving to God – his choice of that bread – literally cost him his life, but God raised him up. The resurrection is God’s ultimate ‘yes’ to the complete self-emptying of Jesus. In Christian terms this is called kenosis, his self-emptying, and the bread he chose, is the eternal life which his dying reveals.

Well, what will we do? We simply cannot have both kinds of bread: they just don’t co-exist, because seeking the one, by its very nature requires a letting go of the other - as Jesus said, You cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). In fact, Christian spirituality invites us not only to choose the bread that will last, but to desire it only, to want only this bread. If we want both and try to have both, we will find ourselves in an impasse when it comes to making decisions and choices. But if we do choose the way of Jesus, the bread that will last, each choice will feed us with more and more of what is truly satisfying and will last. At first the struggle will be on a very obvious level – becoming aware of and making choices to limit our very obvious needs - but as our spiritual journey progresses and deepens, the struggle will become more subtle, more refining and more purifying as we make those choices for the right kind of bread: Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God (Matthew 5:8).

So this week, in your quiet moments, think about the bread you feed yourself with day by day. Is it the bread you really want?

Kerry McCullough
Head of Religious Education