

The Bread of Life

John 1:3-4, 3:16, 17:3; John 6

Some of you may be old enough to remember the famous quote from Malcolm Fraser: *Life wasn't meant to be easy*. Well, it's true, but hardly an original thought. There is not a lot about life that is easy, in fact much of it can be desperately hard, either through our own making or through circumstances beyond our control; but life can be far richer, deeper and more sustainable than we often settle for.

A few years ago Roberto Benigni directed a film called *La Vita e Bella – Life is beautiful*. It is a profoundly haunting title for a film about the horrors of the holocaust. How can life be beautiful amid such pain, suffering and death? And yet we can find beauty among the brokenness of human experience in the love and kindness of others; we can find life in the midst of the ashes of disaster in courage and sacrifice. We can find a new beginning in the gift of forgiveness and grace. This is a film that tells such a story of life.

There are hundreds of famous observations about life with its challenges and gifts, its tragedies, humour and joys – do you remember Forrest Gump's famous quote about life? *Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you're going to get*. I would guess that if I were to ask each of you about your observations and comments on life we would have a rich variety of answers.

In John's gospel the concept of life is always intimately linked with the logos, or the incarnate Word of God, Jesus. John sets the scene in the first chapter 1:3-4 with: *All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people*.

John 3:16, a very famous verse says: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life*.

In John 10:10 Jesus says: *I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly*; and in 14:6 Jesus says: *I am the way the truth and the life*.,

In 17:3 Jesus says: *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*.

In today's reading from John 6 we read; *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*.

For John, real life not only has its origin, meaning and fulfilment in Jesus but it has particular qualities – it is eternal and it is abundant.

The reading today follows the reading from last week, where Jesus took five loaves and a couple of fish and fed over 5000 people. This was a lesson in the abundant provision of God, the compassion of God for human need and hunger, and an unequivocal statement of who Jesus is. The crowds ate and were satisfied. Now Jesus takes it one step further.

I am the bread of life.

This is a wonderful image that Jesus uses to describe himself. Bread, in its various forms, is a staple food for many cultures around the world. It is taken into our bodies on a daily basis to nourish and sustain us.

Bread is also shared, and we see this most profoundly in the last supper when Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and shares it with his disciples. And so bread is not only a symbol of Christ's body, but a symbol of community.

I am the bread of life – this is a truth that not only meets our physical needs, but our spiritual hunger as well.

With the gift of himself, Jesus provides us with bread to sustain us for eternity, not just for today.

Within our western culture people try to satisfy their spiritual hunger in many different ways – with money and possessions, with success, and in more recent years, with self-improvement based on pop psychology, such as self help books and the various talk shows on TV. Many of us, these days, seek to satisfy our spiritual needs with what appears to be the current drug of choice: busyness.

If you believe the advertising and hype, all of these things will bring you happiness, enjoyment and fulfilment of life in some way.

All of these things however, are fleeting, uncertain and limited in their ability to foster life, and can actually become heavy burdens to weigh us down.

Essentially all these things are more about ways of existing rather than living.

The apostle Paul, in his letters also talks about life – not so much about existence and survival but real life, life in the Spirit, and the richness, the depth, the joy of truly living. Throughout Paul's letters to the early church communities, including this one at Ephesus in our reading today, Paul constantly contrasts the strength of spiritual living with the frailty of human nature. Those who live with their lives firmly centred upon Christ will live with a spirituality marked by maturity, grace, courage and wisdom, and by acts of love and generosity.

In contrast, those who merely exist, living their lives according to their own desires and in their own strength, will have lives marked by quarrels, greed, selfishness and ultimately, emptiness. Paul therefore, urges his brothers and sisters in Christ to remain faithful to the gospel, the source of all life, and to live a life worthy of their calling.

Those who came along to the bible study on Tuesday will be familiar with this exhortation from Paul, for he uses it also with the Philippians when he urges them to live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. It is one of Paul's favourite themes.

How then do we live such a life?

We do it through prayerfulness, by making our home in the Scriptures – the living Word of God, and by being faithful and humbly obedient to God's Word in all its forms: spoken, written and inspired by the Spirit.

We do it by purposefully listening for God's voice and direction, which means creating space and silence so as to hear God's voice. This directly challenges our busy schedules.

We do it by living with a repentant and thankful attitude.

We do it by being a member of the community of Christ where we can encourage, uplift and strengthen each other, and where necessary to be a prophetic voice to one another, as Nathan was for King David. This is a wonderful example of someone speaking the truth in love and leading another to the road of repentance and grace.

It is interesting to reflect upon the fact that whilst God's forgiveness of David was complete and life-giving, God did not rescue David from having to live with the consequences or the painful memory of his sinful choices.

Today, on the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, as we too remember the pain, suffering and horror of war, not only battles of years past but the current tragedy unfolding before us in the Middle East and other parts of the world, our need for the grace and forgiveness of God is still all too apparent.

From a prayerful, faithful humble and obedient life will flow acts of love and generosity, compassion and justice, peace and gentleness, and the courage to speak the truth in love to each other and to the world.

In short, living a life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, means living our lives fully conscious of eternity and the abundant grace of God.

I believe there is a spiritual awakening happening within our culture, within the lives of those in our local community. There is evidence that people are seeking more, something deeper, yearning for what will truly nourish and sustain them. They are looking for it in many different places.

Look at the number of people making a sea change or tree change in their lives – moving out of the city and seeking a more meaningful, real and less hectic life closer to the natural environment.

There are growing numbers of people searching for a spirituality they can live – granted, some are only looking for something that will make them feel good about themselves and so draw only on what appeals to them from the various religions and spiritual paths on offer in the world.

However, others are genuinely yearning for life, and whilst we must always be deeply concerned to feed the hungry and clothe the poor in our world, we must also be ready to feed those who live in spiritual poverty.

Perhaps, here in our local area, that is the greatest need and our most pressing field of mission and ministry.

Jesus is indeed all about life, and that is the wonderful message and gift we bring into the world. So let us proclaim it in truthful word, in sacramental living, and in loving action as we share the bread of life with a hungry world.

The Lord be you.