

Harvest Thanksgiving, Year C

John 6.25-35

Christ Church, Chelsea

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'No man is an island', John Donne famously wrote. And the last two or three years have reminded us powerfully of that fact. First came Covid, spreading in a manner reminiscent of a Hollywood movie script from a faraway city of which we know little until its effects were felt over the whole world. Now more recently have come soaring energy prices across Europe in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; more and more natural disasters made more intense by our lack of care for our climate; and of course a rather challenging week for the British economy in the wake of a certain 'fiscal event'. We cannot stand on our own as individuals. We cannot stand on our own as a nation. We are in multiple respects bound together with our fellow humans across the world.

In today's gospel Jesus states that he is the bread of life. And it is on that pithy little phrase that I want to dwell today. For as today we celebrate our Harvest Festival, we are invited to give thanks for God's provision in our lives. But, I suggest, ponder bread – ponder this most apparently mundane of objects that we stuff into our face each day – and we may deepen our sense of all that we have to give thanks for.

Bread can indeed be deeply mundane. But bread can also be special. And this is no more true than the bread which we consecrate in the eucharist. 'I am the bread of life', says Jesus, and immediately before the eucharistic prayer begins we pray in similar fashion that this bread on the altar before us 'may be for us the bread of life'.

Generations past recognised the special nature of that bread. Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1070s and 1080s, offered a series of

rules concerning how to make the bread that was to be consecrated in the monastery at Canterbury. The historian David Grumett describes Lanfranc's orders as follows:

The wheat is if possible to be selected grain by grain, before being placed into a clean sack made of good cloth. A servant of good character is to carry it to the mill and ensure that other corn is ground first, so that no accumulated dirt finds its way into the flour. When the flour is ready, it is brought to the sacrist, who must himself perform the sieving while vested in an alb ..., working in a curtained area. On baking day, albs ... must be worn by all assisting, excepting the brother holding the iron moulds into which the dough is placed [presumably as a medieval concession to Health and Safety since that same brother would shortly need to place those moulds into the fire]. ... The flour is placed onto an absolutely clean table and sprinkled with water, then kneaded firmly and pressed thinly. During the preparation and baking, psalms must be recited.¹

The bread for the eucharist is, in this account, not just something interchangeable with the loaf to be eaten on the breakfast table. The finest grain should be put aside in honour of God. The community themselves should take on the responsibility of crafting the ingredients into this special loaf. And the whole process must be undergirded by prayer and psalms, recalling the total goodness of God.

And then, as we will do shortly, that same special bread was consecrated and shared among those present. It was both ordinary bread and yet was also the 'body of Christ'. In sharing the bread today we are recognising that we are bound together in one body – that we each have gifts to offer, and that we depend on one another. And around the world over recent hours, and in hours to come, millions of Christians are similarly gathering in groups and sharing in the body of Christ.

¹ David Grumett, *Material Eucharist*, (OUP, 2016) p.53

And, we may say, for some the knowledge – even when alone and isolated – that they are sharing in that wider body may itself have been life-sustaining. David Grumett elsewhere tells the story of a German Roman Catholic woman, Maria Stang, who was deported to Kazakhstan at the end of World War II.² Public religion was banned. But Maria and other exiled women gathered each Sunday to pray. And in 1965, she made a journey of over 600 miles to Kyrgyzstan, where a Roman Catholic priest was living in exile. He gave her some consecrated bread. Returning to her village, Maria and the other women gathered, made a confession together, and then shared in the eucharist. For the next thirty years, Maria continued to make her annual journey to the priest in Kyrgyzstan to receive her bread. She and her fellow villagers may not have been able to join in person with the wider church. But the bread she received brought them, quite literally, into communion with the church around the world. As we today feel the bread pressed into our hand, we share with Maria and all Christians today who worship in secret, whose pains are our pains, and whose suffering is a wound to the body of Christ we form together.

‘Give us this day our daily bread’, we pray. And over two thousand years after Christ first uttered those words, the prayer continues to have meaning for us, because we do indeed depend on our daily bread. On this Harvest Festival we give thanks for the scientific advances, the wealth, the complex supply chains and the thousands of hands that produce the ingredients for the bread we eat, and bring them together onto our table. We thank God for what we have received, always conscious of the millions in the world who go each day without the basic essentials of life. And yet stop to ponder the processes that make that bread, and what it means to break bread together (literally, to be ‘com-panions’), and we see that in each Harvest we are also giving thanks for the trust and co-operation that, by God’s grace, enables our society to function. In the production of our food, and in its consumption, we are bound together. And each

² Grumett, *Material Eucharist*, p.234.

Harvest we give thanks for the fabric of our shared life together that brings us together.

That is true at the everyday level of the bread we eat. 'No man is an island', indeed. But it is also true of the faith that draws us together. 'I am the bread of life', declares Jesus. 'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' And so too in our thanksgiving we give thanks for the ways that God is to be seen in the world around us – in the foods we enjoy, in the beauty we see, in the relationships that nourish us. The holy made visible in the everyday, just as Christ compares himself, God made flesh, to bread, that most mundane of foods. And we give thanks too that we are joined together in the one body. We are spiritually fed and watered through the body and blood of Christ. And we trust that in the richness of our life together we may bear good fruit, to the praise and glory of God.