

Bread, grace, unity, diversity - the gifts of God.

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist, August 4th, 2024 - John 6:24-35 & Ephesians 4:1-16)

Bread. There is nothing like the smell of freshly baked bread. A reminder of home, of love, of comfort. Simple, ordinary, an everyday item. Relatively affordable and available, a staple of life. A symbol of hospitality and reconciliation.

Of course, it comes in many forms – flat, sourdough, rye, tortilla, naan, bagel, multigrain. Each ear of wheat contains about 48 grains of wheat, and it takes about 350 ears to make a large loaf of bread, or so Dr Google told me. That then equates to 16,800 grains of wheat in your loaf of bread. Now, hang on to that thought for later in this reflection.

When the people were wandering in the desert, they got fairly hungry, and started complaining to God via Aaron and Moses. Why would God rescue them from slavery only to let them starve in the desert, was their complaint. God hears the complaining and sends manna from heaven to satisfy their hunger.

Similarly, Jesus, distributes bread to the masses gathered as they listened to him preach. That was the story from last week. We know that Jesus broke bread many times with all kinds of people. The people keep following Jesus because their material needs were met, not because they understood the miraculous feeding of them as a symbol or a sign of something bigger. Jesus tells them they need to work for the food of eternal life and then talks about himself as the bread of life. Like the woman at the well who wanted to know where she could get the living water of which Jesus spoke, they want to know where they can get this bread of God that gives life to the world. In both cases the source of living water and bread that gives life to the world stands before them, it is Jesus, and all they need do is believe. It is Jesus that feeds and nourishes the heart and soul.

The bread given for the life of the world is indeed Jesus. The bread given to those wandering folk in the desert was a gift from God. Jesus too is a gift from God.

Paul continues to talk about more gifts and graces given by God. The gift that he speaks of in many ways is unity.

Now if I might get back to how many grains in a loaf of bread, 16,800 per loaf. No doubt each grain is different in size and colour, but together they combine to become one loaf of bread. Later in this service we will celebrate communion, where we will all eat bread, bread that has come from the same loaf, each piece will be different though. This too is a symbol of unity. Sometimes we use words like – we are one for we all share in the same bread, to highlight our unity.

Unity, it seems to me is important to God, to Jesus and to Paul. And Paul spells it out for us in the reading from his letter to the Ephesians, he reminds them that even though they have come from different backgrounds, they are now the new people of God. The

people who despite their diversity have one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and are one body in Christ. Many grains make one loaf of bread. Many of us make the one body of Christ, the church.

Paul then reminds them that if that is who they are, then they ought to live up to that calling. That they need to be unified, unity but not uniformity. He also reminds them of how to do that and what has been given to help them in that process.

We are to maintain our unity by staying humble, being gentle, showing patience and bearing with one another in love. We all know this is not easy – we will disagree about music or whether the sermon was any good, or the colour of the carpet, or where we should put the lectern or what we should plant in the garden – but we are called to rise above all of that and stay unified. We need to think of the needs of others before our own, we need to put ourselves out for others, we need to put up with everyone even when we don't agree with them, because we are one body, called to love and protect all, no matter how different they are to us, no matter how difficult we find them. I think Paul would say no petty squabbling about things that are not really that important, no power trips, no having to win at all costs, rather loving each other despite all that. That is unity. That is maturity. That is God's gift to us and how God will bring life to the world. What is more, says Paul, God has given each person different gifts to enable this to happen – some are prophets – who will say the hard things, some are teachers and pastors – who will gently guide, who will provide oversight, who will care. Others are the ones with a great gift to share the message of God's love for the world to those on the fringes and in the community. All these gifts are given so that we might be a united body, a united church, a mature people gathering week by week to love and serve God.

Today as you take communion, perhaps as you take the bread and eat it, you might do a couple of things. First, think about how Jesus nourishes you. Secondly, think about the person who is served before you and after you and maybe pray for them this week, for you have all shared in the one bread, symbolic of the bread of God given for the life of the world, symbolic of how we are called to unity. Finally, think about how being nourished by God, you might leave this place and share that spiritual nourishment with others during the week.

There is an ancient writing called the Didache, at one part it says this: As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let the Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into the kingdom, for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever.¹

¹ Paraphrase of Didache 9