

There are a lot of references to food and drink in the Bible. Most people in Bible times were poor and often hungry. So much of life and energy was taken up with simply surviving. Sadly, for many people in the world today, that situation has not changed.

When the Bible writers wanted to describe what God's destiny for his people looked like, they did not need to stretch the imagination far. A place of plentiful food and drink provided the perfect analogy. In the Gospels, Jesus often describes heaven as a banquet to which God generously invites everyone. In today's Gospel we have the first of a series of passages from the long chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. They provide a sort of food feast excursion during a year in which Mark is the lead Gospel.

In the reading today, Jesus feeds a large hungry crowd who had been following him around, or looking for him, especially that they might receive healing from him. In this story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, which is related in all four Gospels, we do not know what exactly happened. But we do know that the story is about much more than a free feed-up for a crowd of hungry people in a particular time and place. Otherwise, the Gospel writers would not have recorded it.

They wrote about it because it has a meaning for people in every time and place. It tells us something about the difference Jesus makes when we faithfully and resolutely search for him. For the first readers of the Gospels, it recalled the Exodus account of God feeding his people in the wilderness with manna, bread from heaven, in answer to the prayer of Moses, their leader, so that they would be sustained on their journey to the Promised Land. The Gospel story, especially in John, also draws on the account in our first reading of the prophet Elisha feeding a small multitude. And now, here is Jesus, greater than Moses or Elisha. He comes to feed his people, not just with physical food in a wilderness or mountainside, but with the spiritual food of himself in the wilderness of life, to sustain them on their journey to the eternal Promised Land.

In his Gospel, John does not describe the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, that is, not the actual meal with the breaking of bread and giving of wine. Rather, John focuses on what that meal represents for those who share

in it, how it calls them to follow Jesus' example of loving, self-giving service, which he demonstrates by stooping down to wash the disciples' feet. Instead, John uses the story of the loaves and fish and what follows to anticipate the sacrificial death of Jesus. The mention that it is Passover time is deliberate, and the words and actions of Jesus over the food are triggers to remind us of the Last Supper and what happened afterwards: 'he took the bread, he gave thanks, he gave it to them.'

This story is especially about the Christian Eucharist, what we are doing now and continually. Here, as we do this, our Gospel story is mimed, re-enacted. The love, the compassion, the generosity of God through Jesus, his very life itself is made present to us to feed on, for us to be nourished and strengthened until we come to share fully with him in God's banquet of eternal life.

Eucharist is not simply about taking part in a ritual, a church service. We use bread and wine as Jesus did, that we might recall his sacrificial death while also recognising his risen presence in these things that the earth has given, and human hands have made. We are called to do this week in and week out to enable our risen Lord to work on us, to shape or mould us more and more into his likeness, both as individuals and as community, giving us the motivation and ability to give of ourselves, to break the bread of our own lives in loving service to God and to the world. The purpose of the Eucharist, as St Augustine put it, is that 'we become what we eat.'

Right here is the nourishment to help us grow into something truly wonderful. This sacramental food is to enable us to share in the life of Christ so that he who became incarnate on earth can continue to be incarnate, flesh and blood, through us. With him we become the food of life for others.

It is not an easy privilege or undertaking. Maybe we are often not present enough, hungry enough, committed enough, to co-operate with the Divine Presence among us. We can say the familiar words and go through the motions, the actions, but fail to let them make a difference to us, perhaps not even expect them to have any effect at all, other than feelings about whether we enjoyed the service.

Sometimes we feel may fragile and weak, perhaps able to give of ourselves to God only in small ways and small amounts. But that is where our Gospel story

is so encouraging as we remember the five loaves and two fish that were presented to Jesus. A small amount can become a very large amount when put into his hands.

In our second reading from the letter to the Ephesians, the prayer is that 'Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love,' and that 'we may be filled with the whole fullness of God.' It is in opening our hearts to the indwelling of God in Christ, as individuals and congregations, that we are transformed, made into something new and greater. We become living sacrifices, living sacraments, people who bear the image and express the love of Jesus Christ in the world today.