

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

We have come to a point in our Lectionary cycle when we will linger for a number of Sundays on Jesus' pronouncement that he is the bread of life. This week, our readings made me think of hunger, and the many ways human beings experience and cope with hunger. I was reminded of the work of the 17th century polymath Blaise Pascal.

Pascal speaks of the infinite abyss in our hearts, the vast and unending emptiness that can only be filled by something equally infinite – the infinite good which is God. Pascal talks about how we try in vain to fill this emptiness - this hunger, if you will - with everything we find around us. And over the millenia, human beings have tried everything. Pascal gives a sometimes humorous, but poignant and telling list of things with which we've tried to fill that abyss in our hearts; Pascal says we've tried: "the stars, the heavens, earth, the elements, plants, cabbages, leeks, animals, insects, calves, serpents, fever, pestilence, war, famine, vices, adultery, incest." A whole range of things, some harmless, some devastating.

We all experience physical hunger at some point; many of us are blessed to be able to satisfy it in a healthy way. We have the money to buy enough food to eat, the means to prepare it, a welcoming place to eat it. Eating good food is one of the great physical pleasures of being human. But when we try to use this good thing to fill a hunger for which it is not meant, we can do harm to ourselves. The Israelites out in the desert don't know where God is leading them. They have heard of God's promise, but they don't see any evidence of it. It is often just that way when we let God lead us into new places, into new stages of our lives, into new ways of seeing and being. We try to trust God leading us, but we can't quite see the road ahead, and we worry that God has abandoned God's care for us, and God's promise seems too far away to be real. The Israelites are longing for their days of enslavement; at least then they weren't physically hungry; they knew where their next meal was coming from. They are willing to substitute those pots of food for their search for God's promise. God is asking something of them that is very hard: Attune yourselves to the hunger of your souls, your spirits; seeking out God to satisfy that hunger is what will save you. If you think only of your stomach, you are not liberated; if you set your heart only on what you can see in front of you and grasp with your hands you are easily enslaved by it.

Jesus expands on this message. The crowd he has miraculously fed with five loaves and two fishes looks for him again. Jesus gave them food they didn't have to toil for, enough to fill every belly. For poor people in Jesus' day, this would have been something worth crossing the sea of Galilee to get hold of. Life was not easy for them; if they were farmers, they depended on making enough from their crops to sustain them after they paid their taxes to Rome and to the Temple. If they were day labourers with no land, they would be dependent on finding enough work to buy bread, and then could only pray they would have enough to meet their needs that day. Jesus tells the crowd that letting this kind of hunger lead their lives and direct their actions, to focus their thoughts only on having enough to meet their physical needs will leave them hungry still. The bread that sustains, that lasts, that will bring them life is the bread of spiritual one-ness with God. To take into ourselves what God feeds us is to nourish our souls in such a way that we experience eternity.

“We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's

growth in building itself up in love.” What are we taking in to nourish ourselves so that we can grow up into the body that God has envisioned for us? Are we seeking the good food that builds us up, that gives us the muscle and ligaments of humility, gentleness, patience, hope and peace, and the love that flows through us as our lifeblood? Or are we reaching backward to try to feed our hungers in ways that enslave us, that turn us aside from ardently pursuing the promises of God? Many of us are beset by need; are we allowing that adversity to lead us to neglect the most essential need of relationship with God, union with God’s Spirit, and unity in God’s Spirit with ourselves and our neighbor?

God asked a lot of the Israelites when God liberated them from enslavement and led them to the desert. God asked for a deep and faithful trust that is hard for most of us to sustain over a lifetime. Jesus asked a lot of those people of Galilee, poor, labouring, conquered by Rome, desperate for hope and for healing. Jesus asked them to make room in their minds and their hearts and their days and nights to seek first the holy reign of God, to hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice as much or more than they hungered for their daily bread. Where does paying such attention to our spiritual hunger lead us? To use the words of Blaise

Pascal, if we fill the infinite abyss of our hearts, our unfathomable spiritual hunger with the infinite good which is God, we will find ourselves truly alive, alive in a way that endures for eternity. Listen for your own soul's hunger; do not try to satisfy it with anything you readily see and grasp. Seek first the promises of God and allow God to nourish what is empty and dying in you and in your life with the grace which is sustaining and enlivening. For the bread of God is that which is everlasting and gives life to the world.

Amen.