

John 6: 25-35

Being on the journey chartered by Jesus

VIDEO - Oliver

How have you been this week? I know for some there have been trials and tribulations, sadness, confusion, loneliness, fears ... not wanting to trivialise those deep and sometimes hurting concerns, they are on the whole first world problems.

So in the context of our reading, How have you been this week? Hungry? Short of bread?

I am guessing, and I suppose that none of us has ever gone hungry, not this week not any week?

If you are working at a school, in one of the poorer suburbs – you may have experienced children coming in hungry?

In Gods-zone, a land flowing with milk and honey, why do we have people who are hungry, genuinely hungry, in Aotearoa NZ, and it has not just been a 21stC problem?

I quote “Far too many of today’s NZers come to view today’s capitalism not as their friend but as their foe, and they are not all wrong ... that is why we believe capitalism must regain its responsible human face ... “

(Quote – guess who) he must have been reading the book – Saving Capitalism

In another time, another era -

Peace! Land! Bread! This was the battle cry of the 1917 October Revolution (old calendar) that would change the history of Russia, and indeed the entire world – the roar of the armed forces, factory workers and peasants fed up with a failed system and the trials of war, in a Tsar led Russia.

This week we continue the stories about ‘bread’, and one such story comes from the storyteller we call John.

Charles Dickens 16thC England was cruel and unjust, and Dickens epitomises this in Oliver, “more sir”.

VIDEO – “More Sir”

In John's story, the crowd responds with the cry: ‘More sir!’.

As often as I do I start with the premise that these stories are familiar to all of us.

The people eat their fill of bread.

Yet John indicates they are not satisfied.

I have been exploring these last number of months, with you, I hope, just how we, in the 21st-century world, receive and interpret the stories from our biblical tradition. I hope my offering to you an alternative to our

traditional conservative ways of interpreting scripture has been enlightening even heart-warming?

For me and many others, this is an important question, how we interpret scripture for the 21stC.

I don't know about you, but what I hear and see through the media on how people interpret scripture for today and today's issues, very frightening.

So how does this and the other stories on 'bread', where the storytellers have Jesus trying to get the people to look beyond the literal? Look beyond Jesus as a provider of bread. "more sir."

But they either refuse or are unable to see beyond the literal, the literal Jesus who, snap snap, provides my all.

So expressing a degree of frustration, John's Jesus says: 'you are not looking for me because you have seen the signs, but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat'.

Jesus has just fed them. They were hungry, they were hungry because of staying in the hills and listening to his words, and he had compassion for them.

But they continue to want the actual thing - the literal answer to their needs. The dialogue reaches a new height of irony as the crowd asks for a sign. They had earlier witnessed the sign given in Jesus' feeding of the

5000! The crowds then respond to Jesus' claim just as the Samaritan woman had done when told about the gift of the water of life. She said, 'Sir, give me this water'. They say, 'Sir, give us this bread always.' Neither she nor they at this point understand its true meaning. Jesus then makes his famous declaration which draws together both stories: 'I am the bread of life. Anyone coming to me shall not hunger; anyone believing in me shall never thirst.'

As usual, Jesus does not give a literal answer, Jesus argues that it leaves everyone just as hungry as before. They are unable to look beyond the words.

That is too complex.

Too difficult.

Too stressful.

They settle only for what they see and taste and touch.

I think John's Jesus is a realist. He knows these people are looking for actual food that fills the hungry stomach. They want miracles that will make their lives easier.

In a rural peasant culture

- where food is not always plentiful,
- where peasant farmers had been forced off their land, crushed by the rich and powerful,
- where people are persecuted because of their beliefs ...
- Where magic or miracles are easier and more welcome than the grind of daily reality.

Don't think that I am suggesting that somehow these people deserve their plight or are responsible for it, or if they only prayed harder, or had more faith, their situation would change. That is to take it all literally.

What John is trying to suggest through this story, maybe 60+ years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, is look, listen, hear, imagine beyond the literal words.

Katerina Whitley, a professor of communication who has also reflected on these stories, suggests: 'The words of Jesus, though based on what the people knew from experience, always point to that which is true, to that which does not perish. But the people clamour for more assurance than that... (Worship that works Website 2003).

That's back then.

What about us, now, in our so-called 'postmodern' society?

More so than they, we live in an age where the 'literal.' is constantly struggling with the 'more than', in a climate where answers have international or global implications. And the literal seems to be winning.

Fundamentalists still ask for a sign, an answer, that is firm and unquestionable:

to the sadness of abortion,

to the fear of terrorism,
the scandal of sexuality,
to the problem of disobedient children,
to the rapid technological changes, that baffle them.

It is easier to retreat from the world that confronts our ideals.

And look for concrete and secure answers.
Ambiguity is troubling.
People want definite assurances.

While at Theological College, we had an envoy of the Dalai Lama come and be with us for a few days. He was invited to share in our regular morning Chapel Service. One of our colleagues, also a student for ministry refused to come, for the bible for him was clear, you did not share the worship of God with people of religions outside of Christianity. I don't know what our colleague thought of us who welcomed and broke bread with the envoy.

For too long people have 'cherry picked' only those portions of the Bible they can manipulate, and take it literally, it gives the fundamentalist deft assurances.

In some words of warning, Katerina Whitley also points out:

'Literal interpretation of what we don't like gives us permission not to love those who are different from us' (Worship that works Website 2003).

And that too is very serious!

The problem with literalism is it does not reveal the truth. It hides it.

It comes from a position of fear and positioning and is fuelled by what I believe is a misrepresentation of religious experience. And when it comes from within the religious community, it is often all the more dangerous and vitriolic.

John's Jesus was not a literalist. His ongoing battle with the Pharisee, Sadducees the holders and interpreters of the law, a law they took literally, which when taken literally marginalised so many people for so many reasons. The eating of bread is much more than the mere ingestion of food as nourishment for the body. It is the symbolic sharing of our common humanity, in mutuality with those around us.

So, John, the storyteller invites his listeners, then (and I reckon, now), to seek the meaning beyond the words, beyond the 'bread' beyond the literal.

For in the doing of that we are freed to go on the journey chartered by Jesus rather than being caught up in worshipping the journey of Jesus, as do the literalists. I also believe this way of life is liberating because it shows us something of what it means to be human, it invites us to find in ourselves with the same powers that were manifest in Jesus, and it means we are to be co-creators with God.

