

One of the features of the Gospels, and especially of the Gospel of John from which we have read this morning, is that all sorts of people come to Jesus over and over again attempting to understand who he is, where he comes from, what he symbolizes and represents in their lives. The question of Jesus' identity is foundational to Christianity—one of the questions with which every believer must wrestle. Even those professing no allegiance to Jesus must deal with him in some way that they reject and dismiss him as irrelevant. One of the fascinating questions which we all must ponder is: with what words, images, and pictures do we think about and pray to Jesus? What language do we use to speak of God; how do we recognize this “man of Galilee” whom some call Lord and Savior even as others perceive him as a simple man with exceptional powers and influence with little relevance for our lives today?

Today's gospel continues to unpack the story of Jesus' feeding of the 5000—the subject of last Sunday's Gospel. It becomes readily evident from John's gospel that there are a variety of interpretations and understandings of Jesus as he presides over the feeding of 5000 men, and perhaps as many woman and even more children with five loaves of bread and two fish. For the next three successive Sundays we shall continue to explore reverberations of this wonderful story as we examine one of the great themes of Christianity—Jesus: the “*bread of life*”.

In spending five Sundays on “Jesus as the bread of life” we note considerable confusion even in the Church of the meaning of the feeding of the 5000. Jesus as *the bread of life* is one of the important and vital theological concepts of our Episcopal Church since the Eucharist—the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup of wine we believe the Body and Blood of Christ is an act we do every single Sunday. Eucharist—the giving thanks for the real presence of Jesus revealed in the bread and wine even as it is offered in Episcopal Churches throughout the U.S. and around the world means different things to those who participate in the liturgy of the Church. Some have been *formally* educated in the church and others participate with less “intellectual” understanding. But for all of us Jesus becomes *literally, figuratively and metaphorically* the “food” that sustains our lives. John Calvin, one of the great reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when asked to explain the Eucharist said, “I would rather experience it than to understand it”. Eucharist can mean many different things for all who participate in this special meal, a re-enactment of the feeding of the 5000.

Last Sunday I preached in an Episcopal chapel in Rye Beach, New Hampshire: St. Andrew's By-the-Sea. This beautiful little church is a national historic landmark and a summer chapel open from June through September. Like all Episcopal Churches, St. Andrew's welcomes all persons of faith and those with little or no faith. Those attending that morning came from surrounding churches in the area and others were on holiday—from further away. All of us chose to worship God, to observe and honor the Sabbath in that lovely, seaside setting. As is the custom of the Episcopal Church and other liturgical churches, the scripture offered at Christ & Holy Trinity last week was the same as St. Andrew's: the story of the feeding of the 5000.

Preaching to a never-before-experienced congregation can be exciting and challenging for the preacher as well as the congregation since neither knows exactly what to expect. It can be a wonderfully rich, rewarding experience and can be what we sometimes call a “learning experience”. Hopeful of making a connection with that congregation, I told a story by the New Hampshire poet, Donald Hall, sometime poet-laureate of the United States—a story on other occasions I have shared with this congregation. My intention of telling about the box of string *too short to be saved*—a box Mr. Hall found in the attic of his grandparents home in New Hampshire—was in order that the congregation make a connection with our practice of tucking scripture heard of a Sunday morning away in the “attic of our lives”. We do this hoping that that there will come a day when the bits and pieces of vaguely remembered stories of scripture collected over time will find some practical use.

In “tucking away” scripture—as if bits of string we could someday use but not knowing how it would apply in our lives we set aside stories, parables and sayings of Holy Scripture for some “other time”. We mean well. But soon we forget the many illustrations, stories and sayings of this Holy book as we get on with our lives.

I suspect many of us studied a foreign language when we were in school or college. Even if we like many students of today have studied abroad, our ability to read, speak, communicate in a foreign language speedily diminishes if we do not maintain the language in everyday use. The same is true of the language of faith. Even if we attend church Sunday after Sunday listening to scripture, singing the hymns and reading the psalms, without repetition and application we lose it quickly to other things in our over-scheduled weekdays of work, home, house, cars, children, finances, health, parents that overwhelm our lives. In the way that many of us have lost our German, French, Italian, Latin, Greek, Spanish and whatever language we studied in the past, so it is for many of us with our faith. Unless we use the language of faith on a daily basis, these words, expressions and images (confusing as best) can quickly disappear and be gone forever. For others who have never learned or been taught the language of faith, faith in Jesus and a relationship with the Church is easily dismissed as irrelevant and of no significance.

Last week a young man of this parish just graduated from college who spent the summer teaching Arabic to high school students, came to my office for a chat. Grabbing every job he can, he is saving his money while strategizing how he can return to Jordan and the Middle East. He intends to become even more proficient in Arabic to fulfill his dream of blending political science, Middle Eastern culture, and ancient and modern history in a vital way in his life. This is a young man with a dream at a time we in the West should be learning all we can of the Arabic-speaking, Muslim world. Would that every one of us be as passionate about our faith and the language of faith as is he of Arabic-speaking, Muslim world!

Last week, hoping that the congregation would *take away* something of what I shared with them in my sermon and the “language of faith”, I invited them to take home the leaflet insert on which our scripture lessons were written. I invited them to pin the sheets to their refrigerators, tuck them into mirrors in entrance halls and on their bathroom mirrors in hopes that every day they would encounter the *language of faith* through the story of feeding of the five thousand. I invited them—rather than tuck it away in a shoebox “in their attics”, to keep scripture in front of them every day. I invited them to read it out loud and *wrestle with it* every day.

I extend that invitation to this congregation especially through this coming year at CHT. In September we shall return to our regular schedule of Sunday and weekday worship; shall celebrate our ministry fair; begin anew our church school and adult education programs on Sundays and weekdays; Confirmation shall begin; youth and adult choirs will return from summer Sabbaths; and we shall renew **familiar and new ways** of being a congregation and family of faith.

One of the resources we shall use this year is a book by the Presbyterian pastor/teacher—Eugene Peterson. It is called, Eat This Book. Peterson suggests that we must “ingest” the words of Holy Scripture and that the Bible and Bible study become a way of life for all Christians. Without Jesus as the “food of life”, Christians will starve to death. He cites the writing of St. John, author of the book of Revelation who like the prophet Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him, also *ate books*. Peterson notes that these Old Testament prophets like St. John care about the language of faith and that they literally eat scrolls upon which the Word of God is written. They get these words into their *nerve endings, reflexes, and imaginations*.

*I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it, and eat; it will be ... sweet as honey in your mouth”. And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth... (Rev.10: 9-19)*

In the same way, we shall “eat” the Holy Book this year at Christ & Holy Trinity. We will not set it aside as something important, but for another time. It shall feed and nurture us and all who come here looking for sustenance, faith and hope today, tomorrow and every new day.