

As I have said so many times, understanding context is critical to understanding our scripture readings. In the case of the reading from John this evening, context in two respects is vital to understanding the message: what occurs before and after in Chapter 6 and the wider context, that is where and when the Gospel was written. Let me start with where and when. The Gospel of John was written in Ephesus no earlier than the year 85, more probably in the 90's, and possibly as late as even 120. Why is where and when important? The apostle John, indeed, settled in Ephesus and died there. There is no clear evidence to suggest John actually wrote the Gospel. More likely it was written by a Johannine community, quite probably after the apostle's death in part as tribute.

Equally importantly the Apostle Paul lived in Ephesus for about three years in the early to mid 50's. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written while he was in prison in Rome. Paul wrote in the second chapter of that letter: *So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* By the time the Gospel of John was written Paul had been gone for at least 30 and possibly as many as 70 years. The Church in Ephesus was entirely integrated. Truly, they were neither Jew nor Greek, they were one in Christ Jesus. That is important in understanding the content of Chapter 6.

The chapter begins with the feeding of the 5000. The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle that appears in all 4 Gospels with the exception of the resurrection itself. However, unlike Mark and Matthew, the feeding of the 4000 does not appear in John. You may recall that some weeks ago we had the feeding of the 4000 as the lesson from Matthew after having the feeding of the 5000 a few weeks before. The clear distinction between the two feeding miracles is that one was for Jews, and the other was for Gentiles, with each story redolent with symbolism that spoke to each group. For example, 5000 was a symbol of the 5 books of the Torah, the Pentateuch. 4000 was referred to the 4 points of the compass – a symbol that Jesus' ministry was for everyone, every where, a sign of great inclusion and the end of division. In Ephesus by the time John's Gospel was written, inclusion had been accomplished. The passage highlights the universality of the Gospel by having but one meal that is available to all.

In John the feeding of the 5000 concludes with Jesus withdrawing from the multitude because he *realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king.* Our passage is immediately preceded by the crowd finding Jesus on the other side of the lake after he walked across the lake to where he met the disciples who had crossed by boat. There is no mention of a storm in the Johannine version. Jesus says to them that he knows they are not seeking him for signs, but for bread. He cautions them not to work for the food that perishes but to work for the

food that endures for eternal life. The crowd responds with what must we do to do the works of God? Jesus responds: *This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.* Then the passage we heard this evening begins. Here the translation from the Greek fails us. The Greek word *pisteuō* that is translated believe means much more than what we understand believe to mean. It means trust and reliance; it is beyond cognition, more than intellectual agreement; it is deep, moral, and consumingly personal. Above all it is not passive, it demands conviction and an active response. When Jesus says believe in whom the Father has sent, he is saying follow me. Follow me, not blindly and not with unthinking obedience. Follow me doing my work is what Jesus demands. The first part of our reading stops at verse 33 before it skips to verse 48. But, in verse 35, Jesus says one of the most familiar passages from the Bible: *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* Then in the last verse in our reading verse 51: *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* This is, of course, a foretelling of the Eucharist and of the sacrifice Jesus will make of himself. But it is more than an allusion to the Eucharist; it is an allusion to the *pisteuō* in Jesus that will give meaning, sustenance, and energy to life more than any bread that merely sustains physical life. But again there is no believing without conviction and active response.

The two statements from verses 35 and 51, *I am the bread of life* and *I am the living bread that comes down from heaven* subtly echo the statement in our passage from Isaiah: *Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore on that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.* As Jesus' *I am bread* statements declare his identity, God through the prophet Isaiah is declaring once again, *I am who I am.* Unfortunately, our reading stops right before one of the most beautiful passages: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

As God spoke through his prophet to those exiled in Babylon, Jesus speaks to us across two millennia. Both messages speak to the power of believing, the power of *pisteuō*. Please note that *pisteuō* is a verb, it is about action as a result of conviction for there is no real conviction without an active response. That is the response Jesus asks of us, an active life loving God and neighbour through commitment and action. Yes, we eat the bread and drink the wine regularly, but if that is all we do, then it means nothing. It is the active response that makes the bread and wine the food that endures. And if we make the active response, we truly experience new life.

Amen