**Re-membering**

 **St Andrew’s Cathedral, Sydney**

**5th August 2018**

**The Very Rev’d Frank Nelson**

*John 6: 24 - 35*

This morning I want to begin by offering two stories, both from my own life as a much younger person living in South Africa. The first takes me back to my student days when I hitch-hiked and bused high into the mountains of Lesotho to spend some time at a mission hospital. The bus journey from Maseru was a little more than 100km and should, even given the steepness and winding unsealed mountain roads, have taken no more than six hours. Instead this particular trip took nearly thirty. We stopped many times – to set down or pick up passengers and their baggage (which could include anything from bicycles to live chickens) and to enable people to get off the bus for comfort stops – women on one side, men on the other. At many of these stopping points we would find an old woman crouched over a smoky dung fire. They had baked bread in large enamel basins and we bought and ate the bread – breaking a chunk off with our fingers. It was a wonderfully communal experience – eating beautiful fresh bread with people who had previously been complete strangers and with whom I shared only a few common words.

The other story relates to a memorial service I went to in 1987. Anti-Apartheid activist Steve Biko had died in police custody ten years earlier. We gathered in his home church to worship God, give thanks for his life, and pray for the many who remained in detention without trial. Shortly after the bishop began preaching I became aware of an uneasiness in the congregation. A bunch of heavily armed police and soldiers burst into the church and began ordering the people to leave – this was an illegal gathering. With great calmness and courage the bishop walked down the aisle until he and the commanding officer stood face to face. This was a house of God, said the bishop, the police and soldiers were welcome but they should leave their weapons outside. The officer responded by saying that he had his orders and that his men could in no way leave their weapons. It was a tense stand-off. I could not hear what was said but eventually the bishop returned to the pulpit and announced that we would be able to finish the service, while the police and soldiers would remain at the back of the church.

It came time for communion and people filed out of their seats and made their way to the front, there to raise their hands to receive the Bread of Heaven. As the last person returned to their seat someone rose from the back and made his way forward. We all watched with bated breath. It was the commanding officer. In the tense silence he walked the full length of the aisle, knelt and placed his revolver on the floor alongside him, then raised his hands to receive Holy Communion.

Segue into another story built around bread and we find ourselves with the crowd clustered around Jesus near Capernaum. Today’s Gospel reading is part of a long chapter which begins with the feeding of the five thousand and ends, not happily ever after, but with many of the crowd turning away from Jesus. Today’s snippet from John 6: 24 – 35 gives some idea of what happened when the crowd tracked Jesus down again. John gives us three questions asked of Jesus by the crowd: When did you come here? What must we do to perform the works of God? What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe you?

In each case it is clear from Jesus’s response that the crowd and Jesus are actually on different wave-lengths. The people are so blinkered in their own way of life, their understanding of their faith, their obsession with what they want and perceive, that they cannot actually hear or see what Jesus is on about. How often does this happen in our own contexts? That we find ourselves talking past each other, and therefore misunderstanding one another? The crowds in John 6 are not dissimilar to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 – there is an obtuseness, a blindness, which prevents any real connection between the two parties.

As we would expect, Jesus has an answer to each of the questions. It’s not about great signs and wonders, not only about being fed on loaves and fishes (miraculous as that was). Jesus has something else in mind. It takes him several attempts to explain. Yes, God provides our daily bread – we pray that every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer. Yes, we are called to perform works. But not in the way the crowd might think. Nor is it even about having the right belief – getting the words right. The nuance of language is brought out around two little words that, in Greek, accompany the word ‘believe’. When the crowd ask what sign Jesus will do so that they might “see it and believe you”, the Greek uses a word that suggests that, as long as head knowledge is correct, all is well. See, understand – and conversion is complete!

Jesus himself uses a different word and tense to qualify the idea of believe. It occurs twice in today’s passage, once in verse 29 and again in verse 35. You know verse 35 well: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” What the Greek actually has Jesus saying is probably more like: whoever ***is coming***, keeps coming, to me will never be hungry, and whoever ***believes into*** me will never be thirsty. The idea of continuous action needs to be brought out. This is about growing into God’s Kingdom – not just a once and only once thing that happens. This is about the ongoing process of sanctification (if that is the language you prefer) – we are never able to say “I have arrived, I’ve made it, there is no more for me to do!” God’s love, God’s grace is given unconditionally – absolutely; but our response is one of continuous presence, continuing to believe into Christ, continuing to keep coming to Jesus, continuing to keep reaching out to our neighbour, to keep on loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. It is not simply an act of faith, but a life of faith that Jesus calls us to.

Perhaps it is no wonder that most of the crowds left Jesus. Following Jesus as one of his disciples is actually hard work, it is about continual conversion, about keeping going on the path with Jesus as leader, about “growing 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 … building itself up in love.” That rather long quote comes from one of the other readings set in the Lectionary for today – Ephesians 4: 16 NRSV.

Of course, we simply cannot sustain this journey on our own. Thankfully we do not have to. Jesus himself gave us the means of doing so in the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Communion, the Mass – anyone of these names essentially refers to the same thing. The life-giving gathering together of God’s people to break bread and drink wine in Jesus’s name, and so be sustained and strengthened for the ongoing, life-long journey to glory.

The two stories I told earlier illustrate something of the power of sharing bread. Complete strangers on a bus journey, not even having the same language, became friends as they ate together. It wasn’t long before other things were shared too – I like to imagine a contemporary Feeding of the Five Thousand – sharing water and cold drinks, photographs of family members, email addresses, laughter and even becoming facebook friends as we move along the road together.

Archbishop David Moxon, former Archbishop of New Zealand and representative of the Anglican Communion in Rome, frequently speaks of the idea of ‘re-membering’. After taking bread, giving thanks and breaking it, Jesus shared the bread with the words, “Do this in remembrance of me, to remember me, to re-member me.” The idea here is the putting back together of the members of Christ’s Church – hence, re-membering. In that memorial service invaded by the police, we gradually became aware of the miracle happening in our midst as God’s people, members of God’s church, were re-membered, and came together around the Lord’s Supper.

For those of us who are Deans, responsible for the twenty-two cathedrals in Australia, there is something of this re-membering happening in Sydney this weekend. We are deeply grateful to Dean Kanishka and Cailey, Archbishop Glen and the community of St Andrew’s Cathedral for the welcome extended to us, and delighted to be here together with each other and with you. For us this annual Deans’ Conference is a time of re-membering, and being fed for the journey.

We pray that for you too, our presence may be a reminder and a re-membering, of your Christian brothers and sisters across Australia, so that together, in Christ’s name, we may be nourished and strengthened to work for the coming of God’s Kingdom, on earth as in heaven.