

**Sermon “Turkey and Wonder Bread”
August 9, 2009 for Pentecost 10**

Sermon : Turkey and Wonder Bread

As pretty well everyone is aware, I have just returned from a number of weeks of Long Service Leave. It was wonderful to have such a long break and to enjoy doing things I wouldn't normally be able to do.

More particularly I was able to achieve a long desired dream and goal and one which has eluded me for over 20 years; that has been a study trip to Turkey.

I was part of a group of 22 people from Australia and New Zealand who joined an Australians Studying Abroad Tour to Turkey. It was a 3 week tour and was called “The Ages of Anatolia”. Anatolia is the more ancient name for Turkey – pre the Ottoman Empire and modern day Turkey. We had 3 lecturers on the tour with us – a Canadian girl whose field of expertise was Archaeology, a Turkish university educated man whose field of expertise was Turkish history and Islamic culture (though he himself is a secular Muslim), and an Australian Lecturer from Macquarie University in Sydney whose field of expertise were the Gallipoli campaign and Ottoman Empire History. Having these three lecturers accompanying us really enabled the many historical sites we visited to become enlivened with meaning and relevance.

It was noticeable and significant to me as I toured around and watched many other tour groups and tourists that the great majority of tourists quickly visited sites, took photos and then left. But they didn't actually really stop, see and experience the sites. They didn't have time to reflect and breathe in the atmosphere, to observe the geography and detail of the site, to take in the beauty and importance and ambience of a place and to absorb it's historical and cultural relevance. Our tour group generally had much more time plus the provided information and expertise to do just that and most of the tour group took the opportunity to do it.

It was important to me to visit and experience and absorb many of the great Christian Byzantine Empire sites from Emperor Constantine's time (who in 330AD inaugurated Constantinople as his Capital city of the Roman empire) up until the fall of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire to the Islamic Ottoman Empire in 1453AD. It was important to me to visit and experience and absorb some of the significant, early communities of Christianity established by St. Paul in places such as Ephesus, Pergamum, Miletus, Laodicea and Iconium. It was important to me to visit and experience and absorb some of the great sites of classical and modern history such as Troy, Gallipoli and Hattushash, (the original capital of the ancient Hittite Empire of the Old Testament Patriarchal times in Northern Turkey) and so the list goes on.

Visiting these sites and absorbing their geography and cultural and historical relevance made them alive – gave them flesh for me to remember.

In the Gospel reading (*St. John 6:35,45-51*) Jesus talks about us his followers being given his flesh to eat – being enlivened in him. Jesus says: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh – unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you.”

These are pretty powerful and confronting words aren't they?!

This, of course, is highly symbolic and metaphorical language but nevertheless entirely true and real in the depth of its symbols and metaphors.

Just like I went to Turkey and needed to go to Turkey with enough time to focus, absorb and experience, to drink in and enliven these places of historical and Christian importance, so we likewise are encouraged by Jesus not just to read and hear about him but to actually go to him with enough time and focus to feed on him and drink him in. We can do this in many ways. Here are the usual ways :

1. By coming to Church and intentionally being absorbed and participating fully in our act of communion with Jesus in the bread and wine at the altar;
2. By entering into the readings and hearing Jesus and the Holy Spirit speak to us in them;
3. By letting ourselves be absorbed in the hymns and the music and
4. Allowing the times of confession and prayer to let the healing and forgiving compassion of

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the Holy Spirit to flow over us and in us and then from us into the lives and spirits of others with whom we interact and for whom we pray.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus often talks of himself in symbol and metaphor – I am the Light of the World – I am the Good Shepherd – I am the Door through which you enter into the Kingdom of God – I am the Vine and you are the Branches – I am the Living Water of Life for you to drink and never be thirsty, and, in today’s Gospel, I am the Bread of Life for you to eat and never be hungry.

Jesus speaks here in such beautiful poetic, metaphoric language. Such language provides images of Jesus that are rich; that we can enter into and reflect on and absorb into ourselves.

If Jesus just used more concrete images such as I am your teacher – I am your priest – I am your healer – I am the second person of the Holy Trinity – I am your leader - they would all be true but they wouldn’t easily lead us into deeper, spiritual realities. Instead, Jesus says I am the living bread – not just I am like bread but I am the living bread. Similarly Jesus says I am the Light of the World. I am the Living Water.

These metaphors are deeply symbolic and poetic and yet deeply true at a level not possible with more concrete language.

Christianity is a spiritual religion ie. a religion that depends on an engagement with the Spirit of God, but Christianity is also an Incarnated Religion. We believe that God is not just a numinous spirit but is also enfleshed in the world through his son, Jesus, and so is enfleshed in us as we accept the enfleshing presence and power of Jesus in the bread and the wine. We say every Communion service “We are the Body of Christ and His Spirit is with us!” That’s an incarnational statement of faith! Every time we come to Church and to communion we embody that reality and from there, God then calls us to take that reality - that embodiment of Jesus in us - out with us into our homes and work places and schools and wherever else we interact with others. We are bearers of Christ everywhere we go – we can’t just leave him in Church when we go home.

Without this embodiment of Christ in us Jesus says we have no true life in us. We may be living physically but not truly living in the power of God and of His Spirit.

When I say to you at the altar – the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven – I truly believe and mean it. It looks just like wafer bread in your hand. But take a closer look in faith and absorb it and let it become in you the bread of life that will spiritually empower you for your daily living.