

## Give up the Food that Perishes

10th October 2021

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 2021, the first in a series of sermons for Creationtide.*

Readings: [Colossians 1.15-20](#), [John 6.41-51](#)

In a brief window between lockdowns 5 and 6, in late June, I met with a group of older primary school kids participating in the German Lutheran Church's Winter Holiday program. They were thinking about what the church of the future should look like. There were plenty of good ideas—many centred on exquisite hospitality, such as having 'Sunday Sundaes' at morning tea, or layered chocolate cake. (I'd definitely join *that* church.) But when I asked them what the most important issue facing the church of the future was, they all responded: 'climate change'. It was the challenge of a changing climate, the kids from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church felt, that was the most urgent thing to resolve. Waterslides and chocolate cake after church could wait. The climate emergency needed to be tackled straightaway. We needed to make sure that they have a world worth living in, the children told me.

Well, a week or so later we met as a congregation, and we very much said the same thing. The changing climate, the fear of irreversible damage to our environment, is something that we as a Cathedral community urgently need to address. Particularly in Australia, where we already live with the extremes of climate; hot summers that already cause devastating bushfires and droughts and, in La Niña years, heavy winter rains that can cause large scale flooding. We already live in a land where weather patterns were a real challenge to past generations of farmers and fruiterers, winemakers and gardeners. Now that the weather patterns are changing, the fires, floods and storms we used to describe as 'extreme weather events' look as if they will become more and more common, and more and more extreme.

Scientists tell us that this is not something 'mother nature' is doing as part of a natural cycle of warming and cooling of the earth. It's not a case of 'it was ever thus', but something that has been caused by our relentless and ever-increasing emission of carbon dioxide into our environment. Burning fossil fuels—petrol, gas and coal to power our cars and trucks, to warm and cool houses or to generate electricity for our industries—is what has pushed the overall temperature of our globe to the brink. We have, scientists urge us, only a small window available in which to act. The consequences of the human-made challenge that we face can be catastrophic and irreversible, unless we urgently act and change. In order to get us out of this crisis we need to make a radical U-turn: turning away from our reliance on the convenience and comfort of fossil fuels to using and promoting other sources of energy.

It's not that we don't know how to generate energy from the natural environment. The technologies to harvest solar, wind and geothermal energy have been around for a long time; wind and watermills were used at the time of Jesus. We even have solved the problem of how to store the energy we need, by creating larger and more efficient batteries to store electricity (or simply by the time-honoured 'Snowy-Hydro' method; using the energy harvested to pump large quantities of water into a dam, and then running that water through turbines when a greater need for electricity arises). The solutions are already there. We do not need to wait for new technologies to emerge. We only need to make sure that they are used more widely.

When we met in July, I said that climate change is not a political issue but an issue of gospel justice. I strongly believe that the solution to the climate emergency we face today is as much a theological one as it is a technological one, and that we as Christians have a key role to play in bringing about positive action and change. At the heart of our faith stands the firm belief that all people can be transformed through God's grace. Christians believe that people can completely change their lives, turn them around entirely, when they 'repent and believe in the gospel' (Mk. 1.15). The Greek word for

'repentance', *metanoia*, is a dynamic word. It doesn't just mean being sorry for our sins and shortcomings and saying so. *Metanoia* is a much more active word. It means both being and saying sorry, *and* also turning away from the things we are sorry for; walking right away from them. In fact, the Greek word *metanoia* implies a 180-degree change of direction. Walking away from sin and towards healing and forgiveness. I am sure that this is exactly what's needed in the current climate emergency. A *metanoia* approach, a 180-degree change of direction. Away from driving our economy with fossil fuels to fuelling our lives with the good gifts that God has already gifted us when he made this world: the sun and the wind, the earth's heat and water, and of course our own human ingenuity and human discipline.

What would a *metanoia* approach to the climate emergency look like? Today's gospel reading, from John's Gospel, gives us a good idea of what's needed. A bit of context first: Jesus had just fed five-thousand people with a few loaves and a couple of fish. Many of those people had followed Jesus round Lake Galilee in order to have some more of the miraculous meal he had given them. Rather than give them more food, though, Jesus challenges them to change their thinking. He tells the people that, in order truly to be nourished by the food that gives eternal life, they needed to make profound changes to their own lives first. They needed to re-learn completely at how to look at the world. 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph whose father and mother we know', they were asking themselves, as they desperately grasped for an anchor point to connect the new reality with their previous experience. 'How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven".' (Jn. 6.42). And Jesus tells them that their past experience and their future hopes will never match unless they fundamentally change both their beliefs and their behaviours.

Our gospel reading reminds us that *metanoia* requires a profound act of change in ourselves, letting our framework of seeing this world be challenged and overturned, in the same way in which the people who had received Jesus' miraculous lunch of bread and fishes had to rethink their own. They thought they'd seen it all: bread from heaven, check. Yes, seen that. But Jesus tells them that recalling God's miraculous gift of bread on the desert-journey of the people of Israel does not necessarily lead to life that lasts. 'Your ancestors did eat manna in the wilderness, but they died'. Even their own experience of Jesus' miraculously feeding them all will not lead to life that lasts. 'You only can live forever when you feed on the food that does not perish', Jesus tells them. Only those who choose to turn around their lives and believe in the power of Jesus to save will live, our gospel reading tells us.

I said earlier that *metanoia* was an active process, was a 'doing word' as well as a 'thinking word'. Yes, we do need to take that first step of having to look at the world through the eyes of Jesus, before we can truly appreciate what it is that we need to change in our own lives to be more like him. But then there is a second step, which is the 'doing' part. Because we need to turn away from the 'bread' of this world—the bread that only bloats our bellies and does not feed the soul, the bread that perishes and that leads people to die—to the bread that lasts forever. When we give up the food that perishes and instead let ourselves be fed by the food that lasts, we are already one more step along the way.

Allow me to expand further the idea of giving up the food that perishes. Bread here means more than flour and water. It is a shorthand for all the things that sustain us. 'Bread' stands for the things that give energy and strength for living, is the fuel of living. What then does it mean for Jesus to tell the people, 'do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life' (Jn 6.27). Jesus is saying here that there are things that were truly miraculous in the past—the manna was a true gift of God from heaven, the loaves and fishes he gave them were signs of God's gracious provision to the hungry crowd—but neither of them give life forever.

I am sure that when humans first discovered that fossilised trees—coal—was a portable and immensely convenient source of energy—a small black burning battery that gave heat from which all sorts of things could be fuelled—they would have thought of coal as a miracle as well. The problem is that even miraculous gifts from God such as manna, or coal, do not automatically give the life that lasts forever. It remains food that is perishable. When the manna is eaten, it's gone until the next instalment. When the coal is burnt, it's burnt until the next lot of coal is dug up. 'Your ancestors relied

on a miracle to feed themselves and they nevertheless died', Jesus told the people. 'They ate the food that God gave, but they never shared the greater miracle. They never entered into the life that is forever, which God wants to gift to all people who turn to him'.

Jesus' disciples speak for many when they tell their teacher: 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' (Jn. 6.60). And, indeed, many followers walked away from Jesus that day because they found it too hard to change. We find ourselves at a similar cross-roads. We'd love for the miraculous energy that our forebears discovered, and around which we developed our industrial and technological revolutions, to give us a life that makes us and our world flourish. It's as if Jesus said to us: 'Your ancestors burnt coal and they died. They saw the miracle but missed the greater miracle: because they did not live by the energy that God already supplies so plentifully. And now the planet is ailing'. At this cross-roads in history, would we, too, walk away from Jesus as so many of his followers did in our gospel reading? As many left, he asked his close friends, 'Do you also wish to go away?' The apostle Peter speaks for the twelve when he tells Jesus that he would continue to let his thinking be challenged, his eyes opened and his life changed: 'Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the message of eternal life', he affirms (Jn. 6.68).

Like Peter, I would rather let my thinking be challenged and open my eyes to the greater reality at hand than walk away. In today's gospel reading Jesus assures us that 'whoever lives by the food—the strength, the energy—that God supplies will live forever' (Jn. 6.51). I believe that God has already gifted us all the things we need for good and courageous living. He has gifted us sun and light, water and wind, heat from the earth, and an intelligent and ingenious mind to use these gifts for good. And now we need to use those things that God has already given us so that our world might not perish. Now we need to radically change the way we did things so that our earth can live on, our planet be a place where our children and grandkids can flourish. 'You have the message of eternal life', we would say, 'Lord, give us this bread, God's fuel, always'.

There is a cost involved in that God-fuelled living, Jesus tells us. 'The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh' (Jn. 6.51). The fuel that keeps the world going is Jesus' own self. Our epistle helps us unpack that idea: Jesus is inextricably connected to this planet and to each creature, because 'in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col. 1.19), and 'all things have been created through him and for him' (Col. 1.16). Jesus is inextricably connected to this earth and to each one of us, because the One in whom 'all things hold together' became a human being to make peace with God 'through the blood of his cross' (Col. 1.20). And Jesus is the head of a body of believers of which each of us is a member. That's why all who eat of the bread that Jesus gives will live forever. And that's why all who share in this life, also share in carrying his cross. Jesus places his cross on the shoulders of each of those whom he calls to follow, and whom he graciously feeds. We each will need to give of our own, we will need to give our all, so that all may live by the energy that God so freely gives. That's as true for our own individual journeys of discipleship as it is for the ongoing life of our planet.

At the beginning of each journey of discipleship stands *metanoia*, a radical U-turn, a radical change of thinking and doing to stop relying on the things that perish, and instead to turn to the things that give life. I believe that the same *metanoia* is required to change this world from relying on the miraculous fuels that perish and lead to death, to the fuels that last forever. And that U-turn, that *metanoia*, will be just as costly as turning our own lives around. Over these next ten weeks, we will be looking together at what it is that each one of us can do to help bring about this important change. Because we can't leave this to institutions or governments to solve. We each have a part to play in the climate emergency *metanoia*: we each need to share in turning from the things that perish to the things that give life. Jesus is clear that his transformative power is not just there to change our own individual lives. Rather, Jesus gives himself 'for this world'. And so we, too, must act beyond the doors of this Cathedral, must join countless other followers of Jesus in taking his message of *metanoia*, the turning from the perishable to the imperishable, to our city, our nation, this world.

What's the most important issue facing the church of today? It's making disciples who have learnt to turn from the things that kill to the things that live. It's equipping disciples who can confidently talk of their experience of how their own lives have been profoundly and positively changed through acts of



*metanoia*. It's sending out disciples who are energised by the food that is forever into a world that still hopes that, somehow, the miraculous manna of fossil fuels might lead to life. It's taking our own experience of being a disciple of the One who gives himself so that all may eat and not die, into a sceptical world. It's making other followers who share with us the good news that we have already been given the food that lasts forever, the God-given energy that can power our own future and save our planet. Jesus encourages us to share in his life to bring about this vital change: 'The bread I give for the life of the world is my own self. And those who eat of that bread will live forever' (Jn. 6.51). Thanks be to God.