

Our deepest desires

St. Brandon's

Ps.78:23-29; John 6:24-35

1 August 2021

You'll probably know the joke. A man says to his wife, "Darling, you'll never *in your wildest dreams* guess what I'm up to today". And his wife replies with the biggest put down ever: "Darling, you *never appear in my wildest dreams!*" Well, I do want to look at superlatives today, but nothing to do with our wildest dreams. Instead, what are our deepest desires?

The lectionary is quite often frustrating. Today we have two 'purple' passages – the one from Ephesians 4, and our gospel reading from John 6. And it seemed to me that trying to find a connection between them was going to be so difficult, and therefore so forced, that it wasn't worth attempting. So it was either pick one, or have two separate sermons. And you'll be pleased to know ... that I picked one.

So, John 6 – though that does also at least link to our psalm this morning. A bit of background first. Immediately before today's passage, and the reading that Anna preached on last week, is the feeding of the 5,000 which ends with the crowd wanting to make Jesus king by force; Jesus withdrawing to the mountains by himself; and then the overnight return of the disciples from the other side of the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, with Jesus walking on the water and catching them up so they all arrive in Capernaum, Jesus's HQ, together. And one thing that's worth noting from that is an almost throw-away line that John includes just before the feeding of the 5,000: "Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near" (6:4). Except that, with John, it's never a throw-away line. He's wanting to make the connection between the Passover – the meal before the Jewish nation left Egypt and began their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, with the provision of manna to sustain them – and the feeding of the 5,000, and the food with which the large crowd was sustained. We'll come back to that.

Our passage begins with a classic conversation between the crowd and Jesus. They ask, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" and Jesus in effect replies, "That's a bit of a distraction. The real question is, what are you looking for?" And He immediately answers that question: "You're here not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves". It's as the psalmist put it: "And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved". The crowd's most basic desire, their initial craving, was simply to have bread, to have full stomachs. Indeed the crowd seem to reinforce that when, a little later on in the conversation, they remind Jesus of the manna in the wilderness; God fed their ancestors *every day*. Jesus only fed them *yesterday*. What about today, and tomorrow and ...

But Jesus is at pains to point them beyond their initial desire: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you". This is, of course, John's equivalent of the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel: "Don't worry about food and clothing. Your heavenly Father knows you *need* all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 7:31-33, paraphrased in part).

The crowd has turned what is just a *need* for bread, into a craving, a desire that, paradoxically, seems almost to consume them, instead of them consuming it. But Jesus is pointing beyond that to what should be their deepest desire: "Work for the food that endures for eternal life".

And the crowd seem to go with Jesus at this point: "OK, so what must we do to perform the works of God?" And this time they get a straight reply to a straight question: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent", that is, believe in Jesus.

But then the crowd, having gone with Jesus, seem to waver and set off on another desire which suddenly emerges. We can imagine someone in the crowd calling out: "Give us a *sign* then", and that cry being taken up by the crowd, "Yes. What *sign* are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" Now at this point we can probably see Jesus scratching his head, eyebrows raised, hands held out in despair and almost disbelief. "Er .. didn't you see the *sign* of the feeding of the 5,000 yesterday? What more do you want? But remember, it *was* a sign. Yes it fed you, but it also pointed beyond itself. Surely you realised that, and have worked out by now what the sign meant?"

Well, apparently not. The crowd have wavered and want another sign. Perhaps endless signs. 'Turn these stones into bread; throw yourself off the temple and have angels catch you' (Matt.4:1-7), and so on. If the crowd's first desire was for their material needs to be satisfied, their second desire was for their emotional and perhaps also their intellectual desires to be satisfied. "Come on Jesus! Wow us (fulfil our emotional desires). Convince us (meet our intellectual desires)".

But Jesus refuses to play along and give them another sign, or go off into a long argument as to why they should believe Him, and instead takes them back to "the true bread from heaven", and points again to what should be their deepest desire: "For the bread of God is [that which] he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. That's what you should be seeking". And with this statement it finally seems as though the crowd get it. "They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'" And finally Jesus can pronounce the truth that all of this has been building up to: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." In other words, "I am not only your deepest desire, but also the fulfilment of your deepest desire". Does the crowd buy this, or do they waver again, do you think? Come back for next week's thrilling instalment to find out!

So what are our deepest desires? What's at the very centre of our being? Yes we have *needs* for food and clothing and shelter, and so on. Yes we *want* to have a decent standard of living, a rewarding career, good health, and so on. But desires are deeper than needs and wants. Desires are things we long for, yearn for, hope for. In our consumer society we've been mis-educated into thinking that our deepest desires should be for the latest gadget, the better house, the flashier car; and for experiences that might somehow satisfy our emotional needs: the world cruise, the seat in the stands at the Euro 2020 final, the white water rafting experience – or whatever it is that ticks your box, turns you on. And, as a bit of an aside, I've argued elsewhere that it's the never-ending nature of, and the never-ending increase in these kinds of desires and the material consumption that goes with them and apparently fulfils them, that is the fundamental problem behind the climate crisis. But that's another story.

But Jesus is pointing us deeper to what it is that we should ultimately desire, ultimately long for, ultimately hope for, ultimately work for. Jesus is encouraging us to discover what our deepest desire should be. And it is in believing in Him, entering into a relationship with Him, receiving from Him so that we neither hunger nor thirst, and finding that it is Him who gives life to the world, and indeed life beyond this world, that we will find the fulfilment of that deepest of desires. And we won't be

distracted from pursuing that, or blow hot and cold, wavering in our pursuit of that like the crowd, now would we?

What does all that mean practically? Well first I don't think it necessarily means rejecting all those other needs and wants and desires, but it does mean getting them into perspective. And part of that might mean finding that some things that seemed to have a hold on us, seemed almost to consume us even as we sought to consume them, might wane and disappear. And conversely, that those things which are actually holy desires – for relationships with others, for the renewing of the face of the earth, for racial and social injustices to end, for example – might deepen.

And what it will certainly mean is a deepening of our relationship with God in Christ. And like any close relationship that will mean spending time with God, daily receiving the equivalent of the manna in the wilderness through prayer and meditation. Frequently receiving the bread from heaven in our Passover meal, the Eucharist, and feeding on Him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving. And in and through all of that, asking ourselves and challenging ourselves with the question: "What it is that I most deeply desire?", and believing that the answer is to be found in, and satisfied by, Christ who is the bread of life.

Amen