

**Sermon preached at St David's Presbyterian Church, Khyber Pass, Auckland
Sunday 9 August 2009**

Text: *'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.'* John 6.51

In my lectures this week, which some of you were kind enough to come to, I noted how we seem not to talk much about a 'vision' for our society. Perhaps with the exception of the election of Barack Obama, politics seems to be more about 'managing' than imagination these days, about getting through one crisis before the next hits, rather than holding up some over-all vision of what sort of society we might like to build. People in authority can so easily get bogged down in detail that they lose the 'big picture'. Or do we expect too much of leaders if we ask them for vision: perhaps that's more for the theorists or poets or artists – or theologians – than the people who actually have to do the job – though one assumes that people aspiring to govern are driven by some sense of purpose, some picture of a better society they wish to help create.

One of the exciting things about the Christian faith is its capacity for providing 'visions'. At various points in Scripture we get glimpses of how life might be, of how our communities could be organized more justly, of how it is possible to live together so that *all* can enjoy 'abundant life'. One such vision is found in our reading from Isaiah 65, which speaks of God creating a 'new heavens and a new earth', creating 'Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight'. It's actually a powerful *political* vision, and draws a stark contrast to the way so many of us live, even today, in the way that it speaks of people living out their full lifetime, living sustainable and self-sufficient lives, bringing their children up in safety and security, and enjoying peace and an absence of fear.

The prophets Micah and Zechariah also paint pictures of peaceful, harmonious, communities, using the language of 'all sitting under their own vines and their own fig trees, none making them afraid'. These are societies in

which all members have a stake, in which all feel that they belong and are valued. In the case of Micah there is a strong suggestion that it is when everybody has this stake in their society that the nations can beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. When *all* in the community – not just a few – can enjoy God's bounty, and feel their membership of it affirmed, that community can live at peace with itself, and with others, and does not need constantly to defend itself or to wage war and destroy its neighbours. These prophetic messages do seem remarkably contemporary and relevant as we look at the root causes of tension in our world today.

The problem with visions, of course, is that unless we can show how they might be realized, starting from where we are, they remain simply as visions. The word 'utopian' is often attached to the word 'vision', and when there's no programme to make a vision a reality, that terminology is often justified. Perhaps that's why people in politics and economics and business are inclined not to take theology too seriously, because it *can* seem delightfully unengaged with the here and now, the 'real world'. Yet, as I tried to show in the lectures this week, while theology might not have the resources to offer practical ways forward at every stage, it can be a valuable conversation partner in the process of finding those ways – and its importance in providing a vision should not be undervalued, because without any vision we have no direction as a society at all, 'the people perish'.

Another vision was hinted at in our gospel reading this morning. There Jesus describes himself as the 'bread of life', the bread that comes down from heaven. Jesus clearly invites his listeners to draw a comparison between himself and the bread which their ancestors ate in the wilderness – but whereas that bread only kept them alive from day to day and eventually they perished, the 'living' bread' gives eternal life.

Why I say this speaks of vision is because it points us forward to the final supper Jesus took with his disciples, his sharing of bread with them the night before he was betrayed. As he passes out the bread Jesus speaks of it as his

body, broken for those who eat it, and of his not eating and drinking again until the kingdom of God comes. We get a glimpse in that simple supper of that kingdom, which formed the central theme of Jesus whole three-year ministry – and which is characterised by fellowship, sharing and ‘communion’ *in the truest sense* with the One whose death and resurrection makes it all possible.

Jesus only gives tantalising hints about the kingdom. He taught that in it, the last shall be first and the first last, that earthly status, standing and wealth count for nothing, and that those most marginalized and despised in this world will be especially welcome, will enter first. It’s an unsettling vision now, as it was to Jesus’ hearers in his own day, turning upside down the values and norms of everyday society – I’m sure that’s what is meant by the often misunderstood term, ‘my kingdom is not of this world – is not of *this world’s* values. Perhaps it is no wonder that it aroused the wrath of those whose position and authority it appeared to threaten, and who contrived eventually to bring to trial, on grounds of political subversion, the One who preached it.

But the kingdom’s real power as a vision lies in the fact that it is not ‘utopian’ in the common usage of that term, a picture of how things will be in some far off time, ‘above the bright blue sky’ – but of how things can be in the here and now. For Jesus tells us that kingdom is already among us, that we can and should begin to live it now. And that’s a challenge for us, as it has been for Christians in every generation, living within a culture which seems to place low value on the things the kingdom represents, and to esteem those values it rejects. Remembering that last supper, as we still do today on a regular basis, puts us in the sort of subversive position Jesus found himself when he first inaugurated it, in our case offering to an individualistic and fractured society another way of relating, one based on interdependence, sharing and trust. And living it out day to day – as I believe the gospels call us to do – means that we cannot be accused of simply peddling something unobtainable, something pie in the sky: we can show how we can begin to make it work as we begin actually to build it, to *live* it, here. Ultimately, of course, the kingdom is God’s, not ours, but the full coming of the kingdom, whatever that actually

means, is in historical continuity with the present, and as Paul says, both 'here' and 'not yet'. I think it is significant that the Isaiah passage talks about God creating a new heaven and new earth – language echoed in the Book of Revelation – because this implies, not the creation of something completely different, but the restoration of what already is, something bound up with the resurrection to new life here, in *our* history.

The genius of the gospel, it seems to me, is that it both offers us a vision of a new way of being together *and* of how we can be the sort of people enabled to live in this way. Jesus offers us the bread of life, both as individuals and as a fellowship; he did not seek *just* to challenge and transform systems that exploited people – such as the temple tax and the behaviour of the religious rulers – but also to offer forgiveness and a fresh start to individuals turned in on themselves, who made such systems possible. He made possible, not just a new way of being community, but new individuals to belong to that community. '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.' The kingdom both transforms us *individually* and *communally*.

And our calling, I believe, is both to 'speak truth to power' – to seek to see justice and peace and wholeness prevail in our world – and hold out to people the possibility of transformation and change in orientation, outlook and priorities. That spiritual dimension is vital for change at both individual and corporate level.

It's a profoundly challenging message, I believe, for our day, but as we sense a loss of hope, and faith, and vision, both in individual lives and in our local, national and global life, it's one we urgently need to share.