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Introduction

There's a phrase used in Ireland. If someone has achieved something, people will say "Who's she when she's at home?" The implication is that to achieve something is to rise above your station, to have "notions" to be full of yourself.

Ireland isn't unique in having a conflicted relationship with achievement. Many countries — perhaps many countries that have a narrative of colonisation — have a complicated relationship with what it means to succeed. When power is associated with the abuse of power, it can be difficult to trust empowerment.

Text

John 6:35, 41–51

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.

Then the Judeans began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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."

Comment

The sociologist Claire Mitchell, when she was based at Queen's University in Belfast, wrote that Ireland is a site of a meta conflict, in that there's conflict about what the conflict's about. Her insight was keen. For so many situations where discord occurs — both in the familial setting, as well as the social and civic setting — there is conflict about conflict. Some people hate conflict; some people may hate it but are glad it has come to the surface; others still are very comfortable about conflict; for some it triggers trauma; for still others it triggers energy.

So conflict is a state of conflict.

We can say the same for achievement. For some, when a person they know comes with ideas about themselves, they are triggered into their own lack of achievement. They may even feel like they are being loving by dragging someone down. 'This will save you,' the mentality goes, 'from future disappointment.'

For still others, a person in their circle who has achieved something can bring about a sense of abandonment. Immediately they feel rejected and begin changing their relationship to the person who has achieved something.

Why is it that having a sense of achievement is such a conflicted experience — both for those who achieve and those around them? It is a whirlpool of complexity: in it spins jealousy, pride, gladness, abandonment, anxiety, concern and a host of other powerful responses.

In today's text, we see how Jesus' fellow Judeans response to his own sense of self. This is John's gospel — most probably the latest gospel to be written, and it, we see an elevated Christology. The Jesus of John arrives, fully formed in a sense of divine identity. The characterisation of Jesus by seven clear "I am" statements (statements which infuriate his detractors) and also a complex emotional life (Jesus experiences deep emotions, and speaks warmly about friendship in this gospel).

To add another level of conflict to this, we see that the Judeans are conflicted about Jesus' claims, and we see that the writer of John is conflicted about the Judeans' conflict with Jesus. There's conflict about conflict about conflict. Where often the English language translations of John's gospel have referred to "the Jews", many contemporary scholars are choosing to use "the Judeans" as a way of acknowledging the anti semitism that has been espoused through many centuries in reading this gospel.

All of this conflict about conflict about conflict.

How do we respond? In this text we see Jesus speak about bread. Nurture. Sustenance. Something that will keep the body functioning. Something made by hand and eaten by hand. Something sharable. Something in the gospel tradition that speaks of crowds who can nurture crowds and God who nurtures God's people through the bread and wine of Eucharist.

My guess is that we all can be brought into the whirlpool of destruction in the experience of achievement. We see someone who is claiming, or achieving somethings and we orbit around them in powerful energies. Or this may be for ourselves too. If we discover and claim some capacity in ourselves — an artistic capacity, a professional capacity, a capacity in the family, in the community — we

open ourselves up to our own and others' energies about such claims.

And rather than get drawn into the whirlpool of complexity, we see this gospel text offering a simple thing: bread. What nurtures us? What can we use to nurture others? What are our hungers? What are the ways in which we can deepen our making, sharing, breaking and enjoyment of the bread that sustains us?

Response

Consider your own responses to these kinds of situations. Do you find it easy to praise another's claims or achievement? Or do you seek to erase them? Do you experience fear for them? Or fear of them? How do you justify your responses to this? How do you question your response?

Alone, or perhaps with trusted others, pay attention to these powerful energies.

What is the hunger we experience in these situations?

And then consider: what is the Eucharistic bread that can nurture you in these places?

Prayer

God of bread,

You became one of us

in the body of a Judean —

a body capable of much,

a body affected by others,

and a body that affected others.

When we are brought into the

hunger of comparison,

may we find the bread that will

nurture us, not the acid that will

destroy us.

We ask this because you know

what it means

to be

one of us.

Amen.