



Bread of Life for the World

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT offers an ecological reading of two extracts from John's Gospel — John 3:16-18 and John 6:51-58.

Reading the biblical text ecologically is an engaging task. Our current context for this engagement is a world in crisis as the global pandemic coronavirus brings death to the human community. And in this context we can be isolated from our faith communities and the usual proclamation of the Scriptures in liturgies in church.

The context is changed radically from a few weeks earlier. Now Earth itself, together with its human and other-than-human population, is groaning. That can be understood as groaning in pain and loss. But it may also be what Paul describes as

a “great act of giving birth” (Romans 8:22-23) — birth into a new way of being for the cosmos and all that inhabit it.

John 3:16 "Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die but have eternal life. 17 God sent the Only Begotten into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved. 18 Whoever believes in the Only Begotten avoids judgement, but whoever doesn't believe is judged already for not believing in the name of the Only Begotten of God."

John 3:16-18 is the reading for Trinity Sunday (7 June). It comes in the story of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. The focus of their conversation is “being born anew”, not just with water as in baptism, but of water and the spirit. Jesus acclaimed to Nicodemus: “God so loved the world”. We can hear that acclamation today in the present: “God so loves the world”.

The “world” is not just the human community but the entire Earth community, all that live on this planet. God loves Earth and all of planetary life. It is a challenge to believe this in these uncertain times. This is the nature of faith that traverses both good times and bad.

As the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus continues, Jesus speaks of God sending one



in you. 54 Those who do eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is food and my blood is real drink. 56 Everyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in them. 57 Just as the living Abba God sent me and I have life because of Abba God, so they who feed on me will have life because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. It's not the kind of bread your ancestors ate, for they died; whoever eats this kind of bread will live forever."

When we remember and celebrate the Feast of Body and Blood of Christ (11 June), we will read John 6:51-58. These verses are within the chapter that begins with Jesus feeding a crowd of 5,000 (Jn 6:1-14). Materiality characterises this feeding. Jesus asks what food there is among the crowd and finds they have only five barley loaves and two fish.

The supplies seem insufficient, but Jesus takes the loaves and fish and feeds the crowd with them. And after, as Jesus asks them to do, they collect the leftover fragments – enough to fill 12 baskets.

In the *Earth Bible* commentary on the Gospel of John, Margaret Daly-Denton gives two ecological readings of the gathering of the fragments. The first is the restoration of the site that provided the space or place for the 5,000 to listen to Jesus and to be fed the bread and fish.

Her second explanation is that Jesus did not want any food to be wasted. The challenge not to waste food is significant. And so is the challenge to restore places and spaces which we have vandalised, particularly through the production and consumption of food.

The global pandemic affecting millions can alert us to the interrelationship between Earth and the human community and the ways our practices might be impacting Earth at this crucial time.

The language in Jn 6:51-58 gives an insight into the developing theology of the Johannine community. For example, in Jn 6:35 we read: "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever

believes in me will never be thirsty." Then in Jn 6:41: "I am the bread that came down from heaven." In Jn 6:48: "I am the Bread of Life" and in Jn 6:51: "I am the Living Bread."

The theological shift is subtle between the first three texts and the fourth. It demonstrates how theology was developing along with the emergence of Christianity. It is the same for us today when we read our sacred texts in the ecological context of the global pandemic.

As we grow in ecological consciousness, we can understand that "sin" is also our failure as a human community to live in right relations with every earth-being and Earth itself.

Jesus proclaims: "I am the living bread." He follows this with the claim that he is giving his flesh for the life of the world and further extends the metaphor to include eating flesh and drinking blood. These metaphors are powerful and confronting. We glimpse this in Jn 6:52 when the audience starts to argue with one another. But their reaction does not affect Jesus who continues teaching: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life".

This is a challenging text for us as we seek to expand our consciousness of the intimate relationship between divinity and humanity that Jesus not only articulates but demonstrates in his being and teaching.

We receive this and engage with it now as we search for the wisdom and spirituality that will enable us to renew the face of the Earth. ⌚

who will save the human community. We think of "saving" as a liberation from "sin" – understood in moral terms. But as we grow in ecological consciousness, we can understand that "sin" is also our failure as a human community to live in right relations with every earth-being and Earth itself. This invites us to read our Scriptures with ecological eyes.

John 6:51 "I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If any eat this bread, they will live forever; the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

52 The Temple authorities then began to argue with one another. "How can he give us his flesh to eat?" 53 Jesus replied: "The truth of the matter is, if you don't eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Chosen One, you won't have life



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