

“The Truth about French Toast”. World Communion Sunday 4 October 2015, Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunedin, New Zealand. The Revd Rebecca Dudley.

Texts: Gen 2: 18 – 24, Luke 24: 28 – 35

(The explanation of the title came in the service during the time with Younger Members, as follows:)



I am going to ask a question that is for everyone. Please put your hand up if you have ever made French toast? ... Now another question; **when** would you tend to think of making French toast? (hungry and not much food in the house, when you have slightly stale bread and you want to make it really tasty and maybe serve with fruit or syrup, leftover bread). The leftover bread tradition is actually in the recipe books with the French name, Pain Perdu, for lost bread; that’s my tradition too. Well, recently I thought that was the only truth about French toast. Then I was speaking with a woman from Zimbabwe, we got onto the subject. Do you know French Toast I asked? Yes, she said, French toast is what you do if you only have one egg and have to make it stretch feed three children. This morning we are going to think about other ways to see things are familiar to us: other stories, other voices. This is important because when we pray we are trying to let our hearts get bigger, and stories help us imagine people we don’t know.

Sermon: The Truth about French Toast

Last week I heard historian Tony Ballantyne give a public lecture at the Burns Hall in First Presbyterian Church. He wanted to show how the regional history of Otago provided a different narrative to the story of New Zealand that has been dominated by events on the North Island. Before he even started he told us how many different starting points the story of Otago alone could have. After three or four options, said, ‘the point I am making is that different beginning points give stories different shapes.’ That is of the course, the point about the different starting points for French toast too. One is a story of plenty and the other is a story of hunger. As other stories and other voices enrich our understanding of history, so they enrich our understanding of faith. So as we celebrate World Communion Sunday together today, it seems a good day to explore the power of other stories, and other voices to enrich our understanding of faith generally, and the Lord’s supper in particular.

In the next few minutes, I would like to touch on the 2 readings briefly and then tell you two stories that helped me understand the Lord’s Supper better.

Well, Adam’s rib in Genesis. Most of you will know that this is one of two different stories that start the Hebrew scriptures we know as the Old Testament. Most scholars agree that they are in fact different voices, different traditions within the development of the

scriptures. Open your pew bibles and have a look. The first account ends at the 3rd verse of chapter two and a new voice begins Chapter 2: 4. The second account ends in the 24th of chapter 3. There are some differences in the two stories. In the first creation story, humans are created after the other animals. In the second story, humans are created first. In the first story man and woman were created at the same time. In the second story, was man, then the animals, then woman from Adam's rib. Is it worrying that there are different stories of creation? I would suggest not at all. In fact, I would suggest that it is brilliant. Consider instead how beautiful, to have different voices, both inspired, to try to help us understand our relationships to others, the rest of creation and to our maker. If you heard Tom McLeish a few Sundays ago who reminded us that there is another creation account in the 38th chapter of Job, and said, 'there are dozens' of accounts of creation in the Bible. I had never considered that before. How beautiful that is, in a of inspired voices and insights. There might be a good rainy day challenge, to identify as many as of the dozens of creation stories in the bible as we can.

Our second reading is well known too, from the road to Emmaus. We haven't read the whole story, but the image in the story is that travellers fall into step on a road together, and then they fall into conversation as they talk about current events and their faith and the things that matter to them. Walking a road, falling into step with fellow travellers, sharing conversations, even heated debate...that all feels familiar to me, as I have had the privilege of walking the road for a bit with fellow travellers in a number of countries, in the US, in Haiti, in London, and in Belfast. In each of these places I fell into step with fellow travellers and learned so much from their interpretations of the world and their faith. In Belfast, and continuing now, I have the privilege of being a member of the Corrymeela Community working for reconciliation, and they are meeting on the north coast of Ireland as we speak, Catholic and Protestant, local and international. In our statement of commitment, we ask for the holy spirit to enable us to walk the road together, and try to stick with walking the road together even when we have deep divisions and deeply felt different understandings of where faith and urgency is calling us to go. We argue together and we pray together. So the big debates on the road to Emmaus feel familiar to the road of faith that I know, and perhaps the one that you do too.

We know then from the readings in Genesis and Luke, and from the diverse voices in our whole Biblical tradition that we are people who share stories and share what they mean us, and learn from each other. I spent many years working with Christian Aid, which is the British and Irish counterpart to Christian World Service. We used to do Bible studies where we allowed half the group biscuits at break and the other half went hungry to a late lunch. When both groups studied the feeding of the five thousand, it appeared that they had different texts. Its about a miracle, said the well fed group. Its about bread, said the group. As Tony Ballantyne said, 'different beginning points give stories different shapes.'

truth about French toast: one starts as a story of plenty and the other is a story of hunger. Other stories and other voices to enrich our understanding our understanding of faith. And so I would like to close with two stories from a couple of parts of the road I have travelled in the world church, that have helped me understand my own faith better, in the breaking of the bread.

The first story comes from Haiti, where I worked for several years in the middle of the 1980s. It was the hungry season in Haiti, which means that crops were in the ground but it would be some weeks until harvest. People start by eating ripe mangos, then green ones, then ones rotting on the ground, to keep hunger pangs at bay. I attended the Baptist church that day, for communion, for which the members of the congregation had brought all the glasses and cups they had in their homes to put the grape juice, and some of the bread from the market was divided out carefully onto platters. The pastor read out the prayers and included the words 'I am the bread of life.' When the platters were passed around, I noticed everyone watching the platters carefully as the bread was shared. Why? I realised it was to make sure that people did not take too much bread. Reflection on this story changed my faith and my life. What does it mean to say, 'I am the bread of life,' when the people receiving it are hungry? I thought. That question took me to seminary and then to working for Christian Aid in London, as I mentioned, for many years.

Fast forward to years later, after I had gone to seminary and been ordained with the Presbyterian Church USA, working with the United Reformed Church in London, and recently moved to Belfast Northern Ireland. It was 2003 and there was a great deal of public disorder, as there was most years, at some flash points in Belfast. You may know that Belfast is still a very divided city, with perhaps a hundred so-called 'peace walls' dividing communities to try to reduce violence. In fact, sometimes the walls attract people who wish to further violence, and a call went out from a cross community group to try monitoring both sides of the wall, to monitor tensions, to talk to people, and to reduce tensions before they mounted. In other words, to walk under the walls where bricks might be flying overhead. I had agreed to be an overnight monitor. I remember one night we met for a meal ahead of time, shared food and drink, stories and jokes and conversation. During the meal, I realised that many of the volunteers were clergy; priests, nuns, and protestant ministers like myself. After the meal we paired up, put on high visibility vests, got our briefings, and prepared to part company, not knowing what the streets would be like. Peace be with you, we said. And also with you. It felt to me like a liturgy. As I walked the streets that night I felt hatred in the air, and there was violence, and brokenness and no quick fix. Peace be with you, I kept thinking. And also with you.

On reflection I believe those two stories, from two very different places have some things common. They are both from different places, but the same broken world, broken by

hunger and hate and violence. They are both places where sharing took place in a meal, where bread was broken and shared.

Many years have passed since those days and nights, and I can see now another similarity between those broken places. It is my privilege to say with the disciple in Luke that in those places I recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Remembering the hungry season in Haiti, and the violent nights in Belfast, I am grateful on World Communion Sunday to remember the other voices and other stories strengthen my understanding of faith. These are not easy stories to tell or to hear. They are both about places where people have been broken. But it strikes me that we should not be surprised, therefore, if we find Jesus there. I suggest to you that he shares the road with us here too, as we grow in courage in the commitment you have made at Knox to live the Jesus way, and walk together with the whole world church. I look forward to walking a bit of the road with you in Dunedin, to conversation and hearing stories, to places where we recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread.