

Today's reading from the Book of Wisdom gives us the real background to Jesus' sermon on bread. Wisdom spreads a table, calls us to sit down and have a feast. Jesus is echoing wisdom when he tells people to look for the food that will last, and be truly nutritious. It is not the bread of earth. It is the Word that comes from the mouth of God. Strong lions suffer want, and go hungry. Those who seek God lack no blessing.

Ephesians bangs home the message: be very careful about the life you lead, about the goals you give yourself: "like intelligent, not senseless people": it's Wisdom again. Now, we all need many things to live, including all the things the world sees as the rewards, the art of living, the status-symbols, the things we point to and say, *Look, here is my empire, look at my good taste, see how well I can live*. Well, we've all got to make a living, eat and be housed and many of us have to drive; what catches us out is accepting that these things can be the focus of our humanity, the truth we live for. Wisdom lies in deeper realities than these, and Jesus invites us to go deeper in search of our meaning.

I've been remarking that, in the Gospel telling us this story, there is a kind of gusset which the Evangelist has inserted. Most of the words we read this week don't belong to the original sermon on bread; they seem to belong rather to the Last Supper, where Jesus creates the Eucharist as his final legacy - to the apostles, and so to the Church. If that's correct, then the objections and arguments the teaching provokes can't come from the Jewish audience that listened to the Sermon in Capernaum. They come from the disciples in the Upper Room. And we know that this is very likely; Peter was deeply opposed to Jesus' prediction of his shameful death, right to the last ditch; and here was his beloved Master talking about his broken body, the shedding of his blood, and the sacrifice of his flesh for the life of the world. Peter would have recognised this talk as all of a piece with his determination to go to the Cross; and he would surely have weighed in against it as he had before. But Jesus insists: his passing into condemnation and death is essential for his disciples too: they must give themselves to this fearful mystery into which he is determined to go, and if they cannot take it to their hearts as their new pattern of life, their new covenant, the meaning of all human life and death, they can have no share with him. What they must do is to receive it as the key to all wisdom: as their food, as the word that comes from the mouth of God.

It is fearful, because no-one wants death. Yet he tells them that their only chance of living lies in going with him into a horribly total kind of death. Whilst part of me draws back in horror, there's also something that responds deep inside me, that says *Yes. The meaning doesn't lie in the frantic seeking to preserve this life. It lies beyond, it lies in the very extinction that I most fear. It lies where the call to love is so absolute that it feels like death*. When you've heard that echo inside yourself, there's no further need to doubt. The Crucified One has spoken, and the Holy Spirit within you has echoed to the sound of his voice. If this dying man can say to his loved ones, *My given body is truly bread for you, my shed blood is truly drink for you*, he has turned the act of dying into an act of love, and our nature is finally healed: because love is what does not come to an end. Jesus has written for us in his body and blood the Word that gives eternal life. We are to read this word, daily if we can, and make it our bread, so that it comes to be written on our living hearts as well, and so that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord who leads us into life.