

HYMNS:	32	“Meet and right it is to sing”
	154	“Come, divine Interpreter”
	252	“Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread’”
	592	“Let us break bread together with the Lord”
	465	“Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

READINGS: Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

“DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER”

“Diamonds are forever” – wherever did I get such a strange title for my sermon? It sounds like the advertising mantra of the De Beers Diamond Mining Company - and it is just that. I have used this title today as I have just returned from a De Beers Diamond Mine in the very north of South Africa near the Zimbabwe border.

And before you ask ... I have no free samples!

Why was I at this mine? What has visiting a diamond mine to do with being a minister of the Christian Gospel? Well let me try to answer. Some mining companies, especially Anglo American Corporation, which is a majority shareholder of the diamond mining company De Beers, have realised that in their dealings with the communities within which they operate, they have missed a vital partner – the Church, the faith communities in that area.

So an initiative is underway to bring mining companies and the churches closer together – both at the local level and at the level of leadership. The hope is that the churches can be a sort of ‘honest broker’, looking at how mines treat employees, the surrounding community and the environment and also that the Churches should play their role in working to make the life of the community better.

So this is why ten people, including some whose role is to invest Church money, spent three days this past week at the Venetia mine in the far north of South Africa. We met senior management as well as union representatives and local community leaders.

I have to tell you that I was amazed at the passion of the senior leadership – a passion to do the best by their employees, to do the least harm to the environment but, strangely I thought, also for the significance of their product – diamonds. Yes, some of it is a marketing ploy – “diamonds are forever” but the company realises that the significance of diamonds is not just their rarity and value, not just the beauty of the cut stones but in what they signify, what they symbolise. They spoke of diamonds as representing hope and promise as they are given and received as symbols of love in the context of a marriage relationship. When the management spoke of their own values, they spoke about ‘living up to diamonds’ in all they do.

Well, you may say, I have fallen for their propaganda – but what I saw, albeit for a very brief time, were people who lived out in their working lives what they said with their lips.

Be that as it may – I have introduced the sermon today in this way because I see some interesting linkages between diamonds and the subject of our reading from John's Gospel, which we heard earlier. The link is the concept of the 'imperishable' which Jesus speaks about in this passage.

Today's reading comes after the story of the feeding of the 5000. It is played out as the crowd followed Jesus and his disciples wanting 'more signs' so that they might believe in Jesus. Jesus was pretty tough on these people. He challenged them and accused them of being 'bread followers', people who wanted their bellies filled. He accused them of seeking him out not because in the feeding of all 5000 people they saw a sign of God but because they ate their fill and wanted more! So Jesus told the crowd who had gathered round him "do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life."

The listeners still did not get it. They continued to ask Jesus, 'what sign are you going to give us that we may believe? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness – we want a sign from you like that.'

Jesus was at pains to explain to them that it was not Moses who gave the people manna in the wilderness but God. The God who gives true bread – a bread which does not perish but gives life to the world.

Those first century Palestinians who followed Jesus around wanted signs – tangible signs that they could put their faith in and that would convince them that Jesus was a prophet sent by God. These people wanted their physical needs met and wanted tangible indications that Jesus was sent by God.

And indeed had not Jesus himself been subjected to the same forces when he was in the wilderness after his baptism? He was tempted to turn stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger and have a ministry based on attracting those who need physical food.

But Jesus resisted with some very important words, '**human beings do not live by bread alone.**'

And what of us? In what do we put our hope for the future? in the perishable or the imperishable? Let me give three possible answers.

For many of us our job or our career is where we invest our hope for the future. At one time there was, perhaps, some justification for this – there were stable industries, stable careers where father and son, mother and daughter worked in the same firm or industry over generations. This was never quite as stable as it appeared but now we know that such stability is a thing of the past. The volatility of the economy – national and global, the impact of technology and the rise of new industrial nations means that nothing is fixed or stable about employment, in any career or at any level.

Then there is the question of money, savings for those lucky enough to be able to put some money aside. We used to be able to put our hope for the future in pensions and in the return on our investments. Well the banking crisis of 2008 blew that myth out of the water. Young people now are having a tough time to find a place to live, to put money into a pension scheme or even to pay back the loans they incurred in getting through university. Perhaps the post-war baby boomers, like me, could think that life was always going to be getting better, happier and richer but that is another myth which has been blown to pieces in the last 20 years

So we come to the third area where we often invest our hope – in our families and friends and most especially in our children. It is from these people that we expect to get the most durable and deep love and support. Most of the time, thank God, that is the case but you do not need me to tell you of examples where this has not been the case – broken marriages, fractured relationships, alienation and estrangement between parents and children, squabbles over money and jealousies which set friends apart. People are the best place to put our hope for the future but those relationships are not imperishable.

So we need to hear Jesus' message just as much as those 1st century Palestinians who were standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus knew how difficult it was to get people to go beyond the physical, beyond the tangible – for a faith without such external props can feel incredibly uncertain. Faith deals with, in the words of the Book of Hebrews, 'things hoped for' and 'things not seen.'

Most of us wish to place our faith in something concrete, something we can see and touch but, at the end of the day, all those seemingly reliable things in which we put our trust fall short. It is because those 'perishable things' lack the ability to satisfy our deepest need. Our deepest need is for love, for grace and for a life filled with God and lived within God's purposes. Let us remind ourselves of what St. Augustine said, 'you have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.'

Those 1st century Palestinians asked Jesus, 'what must we do to perform the works of God?' and Jesus answered, 'this is the work of God that you believe in him who God has sent.' The word 'believe' may be a bit unhelpful here. In the English language the word is about our thinking and our opinions. It is a 'head thing' about our ideas. But faith is more than 'belief' in that sense; it is more than what we have in our heads. The Greek word for 'believe' is 'pistis' which means to act in trust, loyalty and with commitment. To say we believe in Jesus or in God is more like the pledge that couples make in their marriage. It means I pledge myself – heart, mind, body and soul to the Way of Jesus.

This passage from John's Gospel takes us out of our thoughts and into our senses. It speaks of the eternal imperishable. Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life.' Following his path fills the deepest hunger of our soul.

So, as we prepare to share together at the Communion table, let us not allow the familiarity of the act nor the formalism of the ritual to separate us from Jesus, the host, the true and lasting bread for each one of us.

Shortly Leslie will pray as he blesses the elements of bread and wine;

“Send your Holy Spirit
That these gifts of bread and wine
may be for us, Christ’s saving body and blood.
May this same Spirit unite us
with all your people in earth and heaven.”

Until we recognise who Jesus really is, we might be fed with wafers or bread but the deep hunger for that imperishable bread will not be satisfied. When we eat the bread of life, we know we are beloved and that God pledges himself to us. What love! What grace!

Even the people at De Beers Mining Company know that it is not really the diamond that is forever but the love that it symbolises.

A diamond is a very costly symbol of love but what more costly symbol of love can one have than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, died and rose to bring us close to the God who loves us?

Jesus Christ – the bread of life – forever. Amen