Luke warm Christians are continually concerned with playing it safe; they are slaves to the god of control. This focus on safe living keeps them from sacrificing and risking for God.

August 4th

The Shofar

John 6

Our God is a faithful God

Few of us today, those reading this Shofar, would know what it means to be genuinely hungry. Growing up as a boy in a family torn apart by an alcoholic father, I had some idea of what it meant, but even then, I had a mother who did her best to always have something available. In many parts of our world, though, and even in some parts of Australia, hunger remains a serious social and health problem.

Both our first story from Exodus and our Gospel, talk of hunger and in speaking of physical hunger, they turn their attention to an even more pervasive and destructive form of starving for something we do not seem to be able to find in the world in which we live.

Manna in the desert

In the first reading, we are given an insight into what the Hebrews were thinking about as they headed off into the wilderness on the way to Canaan. It was not all that long ago when they had experienced first hand the power and love of Yahweh the God who set them free from lives of slavery. They had witnessed as the waters of the Red Sea were parted, enabling them to achieve the impossible – escape to freedom. They were also standing there in awe as the waters of the Sea closed again, destroying the mighty army of Pharaoh. They were well aware of the powers of their God. They had seen it at work in the battle between the gods of Egypt and the one God of the Hebrews. They had no reason to be in fear of starving in the wilderness into which God was leading them. And yet they did.

Their sin here was the absence of hope and trust in God. Knowing God's power and his love for this people he had chosen, they doubted. They wondered if the God who had routed the army of the Egyptians was also a God who could feed such a large crowd in the desert. They had no reason for doubting, no reason to fear starving to death there in the wilderness. Their God was a God who had proved His reliability, his trustworthiness and his love for them. Having called them into the desert, why would he abandon them now? But they did doubt.

Manna as a lesson in hope

God gave them food but it was feeding that brought with it some significant personal and spiritual challenges. They would be given bread and quail to eat, but they could only collect enough for a single day. None was to be stored away. They had to go to bed each night, committing themselves to the faithfulness of God. They had to rise each morning knowing God had fed them. Putting some in a bag, on the off chance God forgot to send food was not an option.

Of course God did feed them. For forty years of travelling they were fed, protected, guided and made sacred by entering into a covenant with one and the same God. Even when they sinned. Even when they turned to a god made with their own hands. God remained faithful. He fed them physical food and fed them with grace. In the tough days of travelling, and fighting their enemies; when they were thirsty and dying from thirst, God showed them that he was never very far away from them. That he was walking with them on that journey, that he was their God and they were his people. They needed nothing more.

Why is trusting God so difficult?

The appropriate biblical answer to that question would be "sin", or more specifically the sin of hubris. It is the great sin of Babel, of making ourselves at least the equals of God. It is our view of the world, our own personal understanding of the current

situation that is what counts, that calls forth our responses that is of primary importance. God at best becomes an advisor, a voice we add to the cacophony of other voices guiding our way.

This is exactly why the Hebrew spent forty years in the desert. Their ways led to death, to running round in circles getting nowhere until in the end, all of those who had left Egypt, including Moses had died in the wilderness. They did not live to see the land of milk and honey.

Jesus is the only enduring bread

The crowds following Jesus in today's story had been fed physical bread by Jesus, something they would have associated with Moses. But in all truth, they could have fed themselves in their own homes and villagers. Why take the great risk of following Jesus into the wilderness?

It was because the true "feeding" they sought could not be satisfied by physical food. They yearned for something more. But even then they misunderstood Jesus. They wanted to know what they could "do" to obtain the food that lasts forever? In the Exodus the people were hungry again, and again because what God was giving them was food for the day. The gospel crowd did not want to be hungry again but were not sure what they had to do to obtain it.

The answer was as revolutionary as it was simple. "Believe" in Jesus, meaning, place Jesus at the beginning and end of everything they did. Place their hope in Jesus and not in what they could rationalise, justify or set out to achieve on their own. What does that look like in practice? It means living out the teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). Nothing less. All of them.

Living in that way leaves the rest to God. As God led the Hebrews out of slavery into freedom, so too God provides us with the Way out of the death sin brings to our lives and builds a land of milk and honey in our daily living. Not in the sense of a pain and worry free life. Just the sure and certain hope that tomorrow we will be fed with the only food we need to navigate our discipleship in a hostile world. This is what he means when he told them he was the Bread of Life that left no one "hungry" ever again.

Paul is spot on in Ephesians

Paul tells the Ephesians how they are bringing about their own spiritual deaths by living as do the Gentiles. Their lives are spiritually futile because they are little more than lukewarm disciples. Without daily prayer, daily Bible reading; without regular sacramental engagement with fellow believers and corporal works of mercy; without sacrificial love of all others and participation in the live of their faith community, they are not disciples. They can plot and plan all they like, but because God is not in them and their planning, all is futile.

Importantly, Paul tells them how they need to put on a new self, that their lives need to be thrown into turmoil with a spiritual revolution. The new self must be observably in the image and likeness of God so that the world may come to believe.

Next year, Australian Anglicans are invited to be a part of a movement for evangelism called Hope 25. Its value is not going to be in programmes they will provide because they are not providing those. It is all about a personal and parish commitment to reorienting our faith lives in Jesus. We are to strive to rejuvenate the world through our own lives of living faith and dynamic hope.

The Church is not to be revitalised by synods, or by parish council meetings. Breaking away into little cabals of complaint, or forming groups focussing on bringing down what is, or people with whom we are in conflict does little more than hasten our demise. The rampant paganism of the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics stands out as a stark indication of the kind of struggle ahead. Our Church already has too many bitter people who find themselves more at home in Babel than on their knees in humble confession.

If Jesus is not the True Bread that "feeds" our lives and our souls then all else is in vain. The great promise of today's readings is that in taking Jesus more fully into our lives we abound in joyful hope.