May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“I am the bread of life” says Jesus not once but three times (Jn. 6: 36, 48, 51) in this great discourse that we heard an extract from today, following on from the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Jn. 6: 1-14). But it is no easy message. Instead it is a challenge which tears his followers apart. For as we heard in verse 66, “Because of this many of his disciples left and no longer went about with him”. The teaching was just too hard. Whether it was horror at the idea of drinking blood or a feeling that Jesus was claiming too much for himself or the beginnings of the realisation of just what this ‘doing the will of the Father’ might involve, this is a decisive moment and many of the disciples say, ‘No more!’ And if those of us gathered in this Cathedral today, whether you’re a regular here or on a conference, whether you’ve come as part of our visiting choir from Fulham Fields or as a tourist wanting to hear their wonderful singing, if we don’t face this same challenge and choice, we haven’t heard the Gospel words properly.

There are moments in ministry when the most innocuous things set you thinking and in my case it was being reminded of a truly awful joke. What do you call a holy parrotfish? Give up?...St Poly-carp. Well, I did say it was awful!

I don’t know how much you know about Polycarp of Smyrna but he was one of the most influential Christians of the second century. Bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, disciple of St John the Evangelist, friend of St Ignatius the famous martyr bishop from Antioch. He wrote letters, including one to the Philippians that still survives today, urging his brothers and sisters to stand firm before persecution, before heresy, to give their whole lives as a sacrifice to Christ so that he might transform them into himself.

Nothing particularly out of the ordinary there you might think – bishops and preachers have been reciting such sentiments for two millennia. What sets Polycarp apart is that he didn’t just give this advice to others, he lived it out himself. Such was his faith and his
deep understanding of the meaning of the eucharist he celebrated every Sunday, that
when the Romans took him away to execute him for atheism, he not only refused to
recant his faith but actually began to recite an improvised eucharistic prayer – the words
prayed over the bread and wine. And if you think some of our Cathedral prayers are
long, Polycarp’s is said to have lasted over two hours!

As he said the Great Amen, the pyre he was tied to was set alight and, according to the
supposed eye-witness account, the flames did not simply burn him but formed a vault
over him, like a ship’s sail billowing in the wind. Then from the midst of the flame,
came the smell not of flesh burning but of bread being baked.

A miracle to help us understand a mystery. For in these final actions of his life the
Bishop from Smyrna enacted a profound truth about the eucharist. In the eucharist we
are both given bread and taken as bread. As we hold out our hands at the altar-rail to
take from the priest the host, so too are we taken by the unseen hands of the Father.

When Jesus starts to unpack what he means in saying, “I am the bread of life”, themes of
sacrifice, obedience, worship, intimacy, spirit and flesh, and the reality of Jesus’ identity,
all coalesce. We are offered a promise but also met with a challenge: “The words I have
spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you are some who do not believe” (Jn. 6:
63-64).

The problem for the crowds is that they want to fit Jesus into their own narrow world-
view, rather than let that world-view be changed by Jesus. They have seen the
miraculous feeding of the five thousand and probably think that this is the sign that they
have been waiting for – manna in the wilderness, “bread from heaven”, proof of the
coming of the longed-for Messiah. For all their desire to believe, they can only imagine
an earthly life, a human deliverance from the political power of the occupying Roman
forces (Jn. 6: 15). But Jesus says, No. He offers something more – the life of the Spirit.
And he demands something different, an intimacy, an abiding in himself. The disciples
cannot just be supporters. It’s not enough for them to do the ancient equivalent of
follow him on Twitter or give him a thumbs up on Facebook – ‘Jesus is the Bread of life’,
Polycarp likes this! Instead they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. It is only by this
intimate act of sharing in the very depths of both his being and his obedience that
disciples can abide in him and he in them (Jn. 6: 56). It is a union that is at once
mystical and sacramental but at the same time also deeply practical, as throughout this
Gospel feeding and abiding are tied over and over again to doing the will of the one who
Jesus is the Bread of life because “I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me” (Jn. 6: 38).

We might not make exactly the same mistakes as the crowd two thousand years ago but it is all too easy for us to passively wait for God to do things, to fit him into our worldview, rather than actively choose to follow him, to be changed by him, to truly eat his flesh and drink his blood not just in Church on Sunday but every day in all we do and say.

Polycarp got it – his theology, his prayer, his ministry and ultimately his sacrifice, all come to the same goal, same purpose – to be made holy, totally and utterly given over to God and in that moment, transformed for the good of the world, becoming bread that feeds others. Far from being the moment of shame his enemies and executors had planned, his martyrdom is a eucharist, a moment of thanksgiving, and he shows us how every eucharist can be a martyrdom, a dying to self.

Bread in the ancient world was precisely the raw stuff of life, that which transformed the one who ate it, just as it was itself transformed into blood and flesh. It’s a pattern that is most obvious in our service of Holy Communion but it is modelled there because it should touch every part of our faith and lives. As we take bread and wine, we ourselves are taken, blessed, broken and given back to the world as a witness. In the sacrament, we die to ourselves and no longer live our own life but the everlasting life of Christ. The goal of the Eucharist is not the consecration of bread and wine, but the consecration of human beings.

So let us remember St Polycarp. Nor for a bad joke but as giving himself totally and utterly as bread to be baked in the fire. And let us pray that the whole of our lives may be one single response to Christ the bread of life who transforms us to be like him in all things.