

Sunday 19th August 2018
Trinity 12 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Proverbs 9.1-6
NT: Ephesians 5.15-20
G: John 6 51-58

We are what we eat

You don't need to be all that observant to notice that in our society we are bombarded with information about food from TV programmes to cookery books and if it is not how to cook or where to eat it is – what is good for us and what is bad for us. Only this week we are told that diets that replace carbohydrates with protein or fat should be avoided due to a possible association with shortened life spans, scientists have warned. Eating carbohydrates in moderation seems to be optimal for health and living a long life, the research found. And then there the questions; Is organic better than non-organic? Is raw better than cooked? Is a vegetarian diet better than a meat-based diet? Is vegan better than vegetarian? Is fruitarian better than vegan? A fruitarian by the way eats only fruit, nuts and seeds and then mainly only what falls naturally to the floor – just in case you were wondering. We are often told about so-called superfoods – foods that are especially rich in various health-giving nutrients. There's always some food that's being promoted as the latest thing in health. And if it's got an exotic name – like the açai berry from South America or the noni fruit from Polynesia– so much the better. And you can charge a hefty premium, if you're in the business of selling them.

We all want to be healthy and we all want to eat food that's good for us. It would be perverse to want anything else. In a very literal sense we are what we eat – not of course in a totally literal sense. If you eat only carrots, you're not going to become a carrot – though you may turn a strange shade of orange.

These almost random reflections on food were prompted by our readings today with the references to bread and wine our Gospel passage for today continuing this exploration of John's gospel and particularly Chapter 6 with its central tenant of Jesus as the living Bread I have to confess that my heart sank when I realised I was going to have to preach on verses 51-58. At first sight it seems pretty odd. It may well have seemed so to you, as you heard it just now. Jesus seems to be encouraging his followers to eat his flesh and drink his blood in the most literal and unequivocal sense.

It's reminiscent of the charge of cannibalism made against the church in its early years – totally unfounded of course but in a way it's understandable that those outside the church should think like that given some of the language that the church uses, and used then, about the body and blood of Christ.

It goes without saying, I think, that Jesus cannot be speaking literally here. There are, it's true, obvious echoes of the Eucharist – the meal that we will share in a few moments. When we are given the bread, we are told it is the body of Christ. When we are given the wine, we are told it is his blood.

But the Eucharist was established at the Last Supper and that has not yet happened at the point in John's Gospel where our reading takes place. These words of Jesus cannot refer directly to something that hasn't yet taken place. They would be meaningless to his audience. There are also echoes of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross – especially in that word 'blood' – but, again, that has not yet taken place, so the reference would be meaningless to his hearers. They could hardly be expected to understand a reference to a future event of which they could have known nothing.

For me – and it has to be said that this is a controversial passage about which scholars disagree – for me this passage is not primarily about the Eucharist nor about Christ's death. Those two facts overshadow and permeate the words but they are not the fundamental meaning. Perhaps a clue to what is meant lies in those famous words of the collect for Bible Sunday where we pray that we may “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the words of Scripture”. Again we have the imagery of food.

That is the language of assimilation. We are to assimilate the words of the Bible and make them our own, make them part of us. We are what we consume spiritually as well as physically. The more we let the words of Scripture become part of us, the more they will influence how we think and how we act. They will shape the very people that we are. Our Gospel reading is also talking the language of assimilation.

Christianity is not basically a way of life based on words, even the words of the Bible. It's a way of life based on a person, a living, breathing, embodied person – the embodiment, the enfleshment of God – hence perhaps the emphasis in this passage on the very physicality of food, on eating flesh and blood.

Jesus on the face of it is exhorting us to do something that doesn't come naturally to us. In fact, it's repellent – and it was especially so to his audience, who were Jewish and therefore forbidden to consume blood, Leviticus 17 10-14 made that absolutely clear.

Neither does it necessarily come naturally to us to lead lives of sacrificial love like that of Jesus himself. It's as if Jesus is trying to shock us into realising the radical nature of following him.

So, Jesus is inviting us to inwardly digest the person that is himself because, if we do that, it will be supremely beneficial to our spiritual health. It will be become, using the traditional word, our Salvation. To the extent that we inwardly digest Jesus in this spiritual sense, the more Christ-like we become.

The fact is that we consume spiritual influences on a daily base, just as we eat food every day. Some of those influences are beneficial and some are not. If we eat the spiritual equivalent of junk food (and there's lot of junk food out there), we can't expect to lead a healthy spiritual life.

But if we inwardly digest Jesus, his body and his blood he promises that he will dwell in us and we in him, and then we will be inwardly and outwardly transformed. In a few moments we will receive the bread and the wine of the Eucharist and as we do let it be for each one of us a transformational experience that will be the life of Christ flowing through us "The true food and the true drink" giving us eternal life

We are indeed what we eat.

Fr Bill Addy