

Sunday 22nd August 2021
Trinity 12 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18
NT: Ephesians 6: 10-20
G: John 6: 56-59

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them

“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand”. A quotation attributed to Mark Twain and one which was brought to mind this week as I have been preparing to speak on the lectionary for today. The chosen gospel making for particular difficult reading. I have to confess that my heart sank when I realised, I was going to have to preach on verses 56-59. Concluding John chapter 6 the gospel passage for today completes this exploration of John chapter 6 with its central tenant of Jesus as the living Bread.

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 now, 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, or at least when covid protocols allow we are given 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 Eucharist the bread and wine 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 This is not palatable teaching! We might do well to sit with the shock and discomfort it caused. Is this exaggerated language intended to challenge how much people really want the life Jesus offers?

Jesus says He lives because of the Father. Jesus is immersed in God; soaked through and through in the life of God; motivated by a complete devotion to God. Jesus lives and acts as

one with God. Do we want the same? Jesus is saying He will satisfy our true hunger. Do we recognise that hunger and do we trust the source of its satisfaction? There is no taming the strangeness of Jesus' words. Feast on Him and live. Eat this bread that far surpasses the miraculous manna of the past. Enter the dwelling-place of God, not a Temple of stone and wood, but the Spirit-filled life we embody in our own selves when we commit ourselves to God.

Joshua in one of his final acts, brought together the tribes of Israel and challenged them to restore the covenant with God by committing to serve him.

“Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve”

The people answered, recognising all that God had done for them, “we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’

Following God requires a recognition of who God is and a commitment to serve

The reactions of those present are portrayed in chapter 6 as all or nothing. Many of the disciples who had followed turned back and no longer went about with him perhaps to paraphrase Mark Twain “It ain't those parts of Jesus that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand” , they understood what Jesus was saying and what was required as followers and fell away. The Twelve however declare their trust and stay.

Perhaps for us as disciples now, our experience may be more of a mix of allegiance one day and abandonment the next. Perhaps there are times when we find those parts of Jesus words that we understand uncomfortable. If that is the case then come afresh this morning to the Eucharist Eat of his Flesh and drink his Blood abide with Jesus “ Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life”

Fr Bill Addy