

Sunday between 14<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> August [20]

John 6:51-58

Once again we have a gospel reading centring on the imagery of bread, and preachers the world over who follow the revised common lectionary are all giving out the same groan. How many times can we discuss the relative merits of bread in a sermon? Well on this occasion, the topic moves quickly from bread to flesh, because here we have an analogy with which all Christians are familiar, that of Jesus' flesh and blood represented by bread and wine.

There is a long-standing disagreement between various Christians, both individually and as groups within denominational churches. In fact there are more than one, but the relevant one for us today is that which describes the eucharistic act and its relationship with the things and people involved. The absolute briefest and least academic description of the differing points of view is as follows. Some Christians, in particular, the Roman Catholic church, follow a doctrine of transubstantiation. That is, the belief that at the eucharist the bread and wine are actually transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, although the elements continue to look like bread and wine. There is no further understanding of how that might work, the doctrine states the act itself is a mystery – but that is the effect.

At the other end of the scale, there are Christians who believe that the act of celebrating the Eucharist in memory of Jesus, as he commanded his disciples to do, is nothing more than that, a remembering of an actual meal, played out to ensure it is never forgotten. As usual, the Anglican Church has a third way – a different answer to the question. The doctrine of consubstantiation says that the bread and wine at the Eucharist are neither physically changed into the body and blood of Jesus, neither are they completely ordinary bread and wine, but rather the real substance of Jesus becomes present alongside the physical reality of the bread and wine.

It is clear that Christians over the centuries have spent a long time agonising over this issue and the reading from John's gospel we just heard has added to the debate. Jesus said we must eat his flesh and drink his blood, and that his flesh and blood are real food and drink in which his followers are able to partake. It is no wonder people have tried to really understand this. At its most basic level it appears to be encouraging cannibalism, although we know all too well that the disciples couldn't even find Jesus' body after burial – let alone do unspeakable things with it. Add to this the particular issues the Jewish faith has with anything to do with blood, and you can begin to grasp what a shocking statement Jesus made here. So what could he really mean?

The first thing we have to remember is that John's gospel was written last of the 4 gospels and well within the time of an established Christian church which was gathering to share bread and wine in memory of Jesus. So the writer of John's gospel was used to the lived understanding of the disciples and followers of Jesus sharing bread and wine in a ritual ceremony in memory of him using these words, this is my body, this is my blood. Another point of note is that in John's gospel there is no reference to the last supper and Jesus' command that this practice be continued in memory of him. For some reason, John writes of this analogy at a different time, out of step with the other gospel writers – but that is not unusual for John. So perhaps

this is simply John's reference to Jesus' eucharistic command but at a different part of the ministry that we hear about it in the other gospels.

But most relevant, perhaps, is the reason Jesus gives for the need to partake in his body and blood, and that is so that the partaker is able to live because of Jesus. This whole section is referring to the coming sacrifice that Jesus will make and our need to claim the grace of that sacrifice freely offered. It is not enough, Jesus says, that the sacrifice is made – we must do something to be a partaker. Is it as simple as receiving bread and wine in church? That's unlikely, but we are agents of our relationship with Jesus. Jesus doesn't do anything TO us, Jesus offers his sacrifice on our behalf, but we are under no obligation to accept it. Yet, if we are unwilling to accept it, we are not partakers of it. Grace is freely given, yet we must actively accept and receive it for that grace to be complete in us.

In the gospel reading the Jews asked, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?". Jesus responded to the question, but he didn't answer it. The debate over transubstantiation, consubstantiation and memorialism will continue and certainly won't be answered to everyone's satisfaction with this passage of scripture. What happens at the Eucharist is a mystery and maybe that's just as well. But what we do know is that the Eucharist is not a one way offering, it is a two-way transaction, grace is offered, we can accept or reject it. Bread and wine in place of Jesus' body and blood are shared and we can partake in it or choose not to. However we understand that Eucharistic encounter to take place, we are given no choice but to accept that this is an opportunity for real, live giving relationship with Jesus. It's no wonder the church is keen to meet for the Eucharistic meal as often as possible, for many of us it is vital ritual in our journey of faith. Even when we cannot fully comprehend or describe that action, we are aware of the transformative effect it has on our lives.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" may we all be satisfied with our share of that living bread this day and always.