

SERMON for Pentecost 13 - August 18th, 2024.

Readings: Proverbs 9: 1-6; Psalm 34: 9-14; Ephesians 5: 11-21; John 6: 51-58.

Have you ever accidentally watched or read something which has disquieted you beyond the norm?

The other evening, I was sitting reading my book while Chris was watching something on Netflix with his earphones on. I happened to look up at the wrong time and saw something which I really didn't need to see, and which stuck in my mind for some time, reliving what I had seen.

It triggered all the times I had heard of or read about incidents of cannibalism, which had left me feeling quite ill.

Over the last few weeks, the readings have been around 'bread'. Three weeks ago, the feeding of the 5,000; Jesus' discourse on 'the bread of heaven' over the last two weeks, and now he personalises it:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. [John 6: 51]

One of the prayers we rarely say, mainly because a lot of people object to the language, is the *Prayer of Approach* on page 125 of our prayer book. In this prayer we pray:

Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.

The Gospel reading continued:

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. [John 6: 34-36]

For many of us the Gospel today is a difficult and uncomfortable passage. It speaks in language and moves in a world of ideas which are quite strange to us, and which may seem even fantastic and grotesque. However, these ideas would be quite normal to anyone brought up in ancient sacrifice. The idea was that when the flesh of a sacrifice had been offered to a god, the god entered into it, therefore when the worshipper ate it, they were literally eating the god and when they left the feast, they believed they were god-filled. The idea of becoming what you eat is common amongst cultures involved in sacrifice, especially human sacrifice.

Certainly, one can understand in these words, those who hold the bread and wine we receive at the Communion table, to literally be the Body and Blood of our Lord.

Imagine yourself a person alive in the first century. You are curious about this new religion you have heard about, this new 'cult' who call themselves followers of The Way.

You may be attracted to the way they live, the things they say, the amazing things said to happen around them, and yet you hear rumours about some of the things which supposedly go on at their meetings.

The earliest Christians were accused of indulging in cannibalism in their worship, of eating flesh and drinking blood, an especially repulsive thought for Jewish believers and one of the many misunderstandings, "fake news", for which the early Church was persecuted.

While our gospels recently have been about bread, and more recently and specifically, Jesus being the bread of life, today's readings are also about hunger – spiritual as well as physical.

In our first reading, Wisdom does all her housework then calls out to the simple, or in other translations, 'ignorant' or 'foolish', to come and join her in a feast. Wisdom feeds them, so they might set aside their foolishness and become wise themselves.

Those who follow Jesus realise that it is not just a physical hunger they experience but a spiritual hunger as well.

When Jesus spoke about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, one commentator suggests: it was his humanity which was his flesh and his life which was his blood.

John insists that we must grasp and never let go the full humanity of Jesus, that he **was** bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. Jesus, as we have seen again and again, was the mind of God become a person. This means that in Jesus we see God taking human life upon himself, facing our human situation, struggling with our human problems, battling with our human temptations, working out our human relationships.

And so, when Jesus says, "You must drink my blood..." he is saying "you must take my life into the very centre of your being - and that life of mine is the life which belongs to God."

Jesus was telling us to feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity, and to revitalise our lives until we are filled with the life of God.

Having some understanding of the ancient customs may take away some of the revulsion that may have been experienced with a surface reading of this passage. But we must understand that revulsion was very real to many of Jesus' original listeners. They found this saying too difficult to understand or accept and turned away in disappointment.

Shortly, we will come to be nourished and fed by, with and through the body and blood of Jesus, however we understand what happens at the consecration of the bread and wine.

Let us be more aware of what is happening for us and ponder its significance for us and how important is it to participate at the Communion service? How important is it to partake of the bread and the wine?

For some they would have it every day if they could. For others it is not so crucial to have it so regularly. But what does it mean to you – this communion? Are you fed and nourished by it?

I encourage you to seek your own answer to it but be aware and respectful of where others stand.

For me, I find that through partaking of the bread and wine brings me into a closer relationship with God through Jesus, literally coming into a closer communion with God.

Revd Sue in her reflection this week reminded me of one of my Mum's weird sayings. She would tell me, if I swallowed seeds or pips whilst eating fruit. "You will end up with an apple tree / grape vine, whatever, growing inside you!"

Rather than pay attention to the historical "fake news" of cannibalism, perhaps we can concentrate on the seed growing inside us - letting Jesus start to grow inside us!

Revd Sally Buckley
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