

**Sunday 18 August 2024 – 12 after Trinity**

**Ephesians 5.15-20**

**John 6.51-58**

Today's Gospel follows directly on from the Gospel readings of the last three weeks, in fact in some cases they overlap with each other. This is a good thing, because the language used by Jesus in this whole discourse of Chapter 6 is not simple; and if we today find it difficult, we who know infinitely more about what happened later on, how much more difficult must it have seemed to the Jews who were following him at the time.

That Gospel reading of two weeks ago, as well as this week's, contains the phrase: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them". It's worth dwelling on the word "abide" as having a much deeper meaning than say "be" or "stay", so it comes to mean something akin to "make their home in me" or "make my home in them". After all, this is what human beings have been searching for throughout the ages: we come from God and we seek to return to him. We are made in his image, and so we attempt to find him, sometimes in outlandish ways. But all too often we fail to find him because his image in us is distorted by our sins and failings, and we end up disappointed and frustrated, or perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. We need a mediator, a vehicle, to show us the gift of life in all its abundance, to show us what eternal life is.

So we hear God's son Jesus say to us "I am the bread of life. This is the bread which comes down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever". We are to receive him, to receive his life as our life, to let him abide in us, to make his home in us, and then in faith we are enabled to see that it brings with it that gift which is called eternal life. Jesus goes further in this conversation: not only are we to eat his flesh, the flesh of the perfect human being, but we must drink his blood ! This phrase must have seemed pretty startling, even horrifying, to the Jews as it does to us

if taken in isolation. For the Jews the blood of animals was not to be drunk as food. “Be sure not to eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the blood with the flesh”, as it says in Deuteronomy and in Leviticus. But the reason why the Jews were forbidden to eat the blood of their sacrifices is the actual reason why we must drink the blood of Jesus. The blood is the life, especially the life released by death to be offered to God.

William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, makes the point that to “eat the flesh” and to “drink the blood” of Jesus are not the same thing. He writes that to eat the flesh is to receive the power of self-sacrifice; to drink the blood is to receive, through that sacrifice, the life that triumphs over death and is united to God. These are gifts from God. So those who receive and make these gifts their own have eternal life, because they abide in Jesus Christ and he abides in them, not just in the moment of receiving the gifts but through and throughout their lives.

That this language was extremely difficult for the people listening to Jesus, and perhaps for us too, is not surprising. As I said earlier we have the advantage of knowing what happened not long after Jesus said these words. Many disciples at the time found them too difficult and turned away from him, steeped as they were in Jewish faith and culture. But probably it is not these words which cause people to turn away today. It is much more likely to be an accumulation of the distractions of 21<sup>st</sup> century life, of following false signs which bypass the cross of Jesus who is the true sign of God made flesh.

For us, who are about to celebrate the Holy Eucharist together, who will in a few moments “eat the flesh” and “drink the blood” of Jesus Christ, to fortify ourselves for the week ahead, it is in the knowledge that we are entering into his sacrificial death and life-giving life. In the words of King Solomon to God, in a passage which we could have had as our first reading this morning, “give me an understanding mind, to be able to discern between good and evil”, in the words of Paul to the Ephesians to

“put on the whole armour of God”, and best of all in the words of the fallible Apostle Peter “Lord, to whom can we go ? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

PBW

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