

Trinity XIII Year B – 2018 (Proper 16, OT21)

Today we come to the end of a five-week Sunday excursion of our Gospel readings from this year of Mark to explore John Chapter 6 – the longest sequence within the Gospel, focussed on the imagery of Jesus as the Bread of Life. It starts with one of John's vivid accounts first of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and then Christ's walking on water. This then turns to an intense discussion between Jesus, the crowd and the religious authorities which leads to today's final part of the chapter.

The imagery seems at first so shocking that without any understanding of Christian life and worship would lead to a person being repulsed at what Jesus says. Last week's Gospel reading ended with these words:

'Amen, amen, I say to 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 at the last day.' Every time John says 'Amen, amen' (usually unfortunately translated as the rather wishy-washy. 'very truly') we know that this is his way of emphasising of an important point.

So today we have a continuation of this passage: *'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.'*

It is perhaps the most difficult imagery from the whole of the New Testament – even including the Book of Revelation! In fact, where the disciples of Jesus describe the teaching as 'difficult', what they actually mean is that it is unacceptable and offensive language. They are shocked in the same way as a person in Tunbridge Wells might be writing to the Times letters page complaining! So why is John leading us through this difficult imagery? What point is he trying to drive home?

In understanding this difficult teaching, we must turn to the Prologue of the Gospel – that wondrous prose we hear at Christmas. *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.'* – this understanding of the eternal nature of God's Wisdom. This is a different understanding from the Greek cultural teaching of wisdom – the Word is pre-existent and eternal, bound intimately with God – the light of God. When we see and marvel at a wondrous sunset, the stars or human love, we are drawn into the mystery of the Logos – the Word. However, it gets better. There is that moment in the Prologue when, *'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'* This sentence gives us the ability to unpack today's Gospel.

The word 'flesh' - *the Word was made flesh* – *sarx* – is the same Greek word we encountered last week and today, and leads us to the key of knowledge that through the incarnate nature of Jesus Christ, through the **same** flesh and blood that you and I and the whole of humanity shares, God draws us into the mystery of Divine Love. This identification is made known in the face of Jesus Christ, who is born, lives and breathes like you and me, who sweats and thirsts like us, and who bleeds when his side is pierced with a spear, and then dies – the ultimate identification. However, at the same time he is one with

God, united with the Father with the Holy Spirit – the unity of God, the source of all existence and life. Through his Resurrection Life we are all wonderfully called to share in this union with God, to be part of the Divine dance of Love which moves through time and space, and beyond.

Jesus invites us all to be part of his unity with the Father through communion – and this is where I think the most evident links to the Eucharist – Holy Communion- are to be found in this chapter. In an Easter sermon, St. Augustine said: *'If we receive the Eucharist worthily, we become what we receive.'* In sharing the bread and the cup, we become one body in Jesus, and through him, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit - a unique and personal relationship with the Trinity and also with each another - the Body of Christ. In other words, we become what we eat. Looked at in this way, the passage becomes an invitation of open ourselves to the dynamic of Love beyond our understanding. In this fully homogenised society in which we live, yes, this passage may seem appalling and horrifying, but it is also wonderful and of great beauty.

The Christian journey is not an easy one. John tells us that many who have followed Jesus turn away. They can't stomach the language, because they haven't grasped the self-giving nature of Faith which Jesus calls us to. They are happy with signs, with food on grassy hillsides, but all this points to follow the example of Jesus and find our true selves through this self-giving love I have spoken of. Neither is there compulsion in this offer. We ourselves are the ones who respond to the offer Jesus Christ makes. As the crowds turn away, Jesus poses the same offer to the Twelve, and it is Peter who expresses the response that they have come to know Jesus as the Holy One of God. In other words, and for the first time in the Gospel, the acknowledgement is one where Jesus is recognised for his origins bound up in and of God. This is what makes Peter's confession so moving to me. *'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'*

We have the greatest treasure made known humanity - Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter that even for us the mystery of God's Love is only seen through a mirror darkly; one day all will become clear. What does matter is that we acknowledge the reality of the invitation offered to us to be drawn into the unity of God's Love and to share this treasure with all we meet. To whom else shall we go? Jesus is the Word of Eternal Life.

None of this is removed from everyday day. Indeed, every aspect of our journey is to be brought to God, as in these words used at a church in Oslo illustrate:

'Go! Leave the church! Never stop going out from its peace and stillness, out into noise and discomfort, out to tears and laughter. Carry with you the living bread that you were given here, as a treasure between your hands and in your heart and share it again and again. It will suffice forever, as long as you continue to break it.'

'Come! Never stop coming back to this place. Never come with empty hands. Bring with you the cry that is pressing behind your lips. Let it sound here. Bring with you the hunger that is never stilled, the fight that is not yet won. Bring with you one who has always been at your side, without you knowing it. Here is the meeting place, in the light of the face of God made known in Jesus Christ.'



Andrei Reblev – The Trinity (Троица) 1411 or 1425-27

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ¹⁴ 'Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.' ¹⁶ Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.'

Ephesians 6: 10-20

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our^[b] struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these,^[c] take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,^[d] ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 6: 56-69

⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The Words of Eternal Life

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'