

Christ Church, Brunswick 16/08/2009

Fr P. Burgess

John 6: 51 – 58

**I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS YOU EAT THE FLESH OF THE SON OF MAN
AND DRINK HIS BLOOD YOU HAVE NO LIFE IN YOU.**

Jesus said to the crowds; “I am the true bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread he will live for ever: and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Oh, dear, what a thought - eating human flesh. Is it any wonder the Jews became indignant and “disputed among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Then He gave them both barrels. “Truly I say unto you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.”

It sounds like a call to cannibalism - in fact when the early Christians were meeting for worship in Rome the rumour went about that they were cannibals. They were eating some fellow’s flesh and actually drinking his blood.
O how terrible my dear - fancy that.

“He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day, for my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed.

It’s interesting to note that St John doesn’t associate this with the Holy Communion. He doesn’t mention it at this stage.

John didn’t write this Gospel until he was an old man, years after the time of Jesus. That doesn’t mean that his writing lacks credibility - far from it. He had time to sort out in his mind what the events of the Incarnation meant - not what they appeared to mean at first sight.

Nowadays we would describe him as one of the greatest of theologians.

If I were to try and explain to you St John’s whole thesis on the life and teaching of Jesus, and his interpretation of sayings like the one we’re looking at today - presuming I could - you would either turn your mind off and think about what you’re going to have for lunch, or your head would explode. It sure would make a bad sermon.

So, like all treasures of knowledge we have to take it bit by bit.

First we have to go back to the opening chapter of St John’s gospel where he writes, “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

We all know that a ‘word’ is communication, conveying something - so what he is saying is that God’s communication with us, is to be found in the human life that Jesus the man lived here on earth among people. God the Father speaks to us

‘through Him’ and insofar as we follow Christ and love and revere Him we are receiving that word - that Christ - that flesh.

Jesus said; “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Bread / flesh - to eat, means to take into one’s self. Jesus says “I am the bread of life” it is easy to see, isn’t it, that He is speaking figuratively.

“The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The bread that He will give is His humanity. We must take into ourselves what we see and get to know and love, in the human life that Jesus lived.

That, is - something we take into ourselves that becomes part of us.

Jesus said he who receives and makes his own, those gifts, has eternal life. Those gifts are the true food and drink of men and women. He or she who receives them and makes them their own, Jesus said: “Abideth in me and I in him.”

With regard to the Eucharist, William Temple puts it like this: “It is not the momentary eating but the permanent abiding that is of primary importance. That we should ‘take’ it and ‘eat’ is an indispensable aid which the sincere Christian cannot omit. The one thing that matters is that we feed on Him in our hearts.

Jesus said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.”

“Drink his blood”.

The idea of drinking blood would horrify the Jews. The book of Deuteronomy says: “Be sure that thou shalt not eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and thou shalt not eat the blood with the flesh.” In those days, it could be the life of a goat or an ox. They didn’t want that life in themselves.

Even today the Jews will not eat flesh unless the blood is drained out of it. It must be killed in the right way and the blood drained - it must be kosher.

So, to eat the flesh is to receive the power of self giving and self sacrifice to the uttermost. It is to receive the power to sacrifice oneself for God and one’s fellow man. We want to do this in our hearts if we are any sort of Christians; but we often fail because we’re not sufficiently submerged in Christ’s humanity.

“To drink the blood is to receive in and through that self-giving and self-sacrifice, the life that is triumphant over death and united with God.

Now John having described all that and made it clear then talks about the Holy Communion.

Jesus puts this whole lesson into an action, which enables us to recall it - re-present it in our own lives.

The bread broken is the human life of Jesus in which we can all share.

The wine is the life of Jesus poured out, given to God on the Cross, raised from the dead. All of which we may reproduce in our own lives in an inexhaustible number of ways. It is “That we may live in Him and He in us.”

“On the night he was betrayed he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying: This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.” “Likewise after supper, he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of this” (or drink this all of you) “for this is my blood of the new testament which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins, do this as oft as you shall drink it in remembrance of me”.

Remembrance does not mean calling to mind some event or some person from the past - it is no dead memorial.

It is anamnesis which means to make alive - to receive that life in order to take it to yourself - to live it.

Both elements, the bread and wine in the holy communion, are necessary. Bread alone is only half of it.

Well, have I made you work out your menu for the week? Has your head exploded yet? Will you go home this morning none the wiser?

Don't worry too much about that. Remember it is not a matter of understanding everything. It's a matter of faith; “We walk by faith not by sight.”

Queen Elizabeth I (who was no slouch at understanding things) had the same problem, and she gave us this rhyme:

“Twas Christ the Lord who spake it,
He took the bread and break it,
And what His Word doth make it
That I believe and take it.”

What we do know is that the Holy Communion is a precious gift from Jesus to us. We know that by means of it He is passing on His life to us. We may not understand it completely but we honour it. It is sacred and so we approach it with awe and thanksgiving, and I trust we go away from it feeling that we have been strengthened. We receive it in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

Many a person has said to me that the most peaceful and beautiful moment of their lives, is when they receive the bread and the wine in the sacrament. It is so beautiful. I have had to work hard to hold back my tears as I have administered to dairy farmers who kneel and hold up their huge, cracked and battered hands to receive the precious gift.

I believe at that moment that their souls are laid open to God.

A friend of mine was Rector of the parish of Beechworth and that included the chaplaincy to the gaol and chaplain of Mayday Hills mental hospital. He did some marvellous work in all the areas of his ministry but especially at the mental hospital. I saw him in action a few times.

Anyhow, he asked the Bishop to confirm a group of patients at the hospital.

Well.....the Bishop didn't really know about this. He said; 'But aren't they somewhat gone in the mind. How can they understand what they're doing? My friend said:

'Their minds may not be up to much 'but there is nothing wrong with their souls.' So

they had their Confirmation and first Communion and the Bishop was in tears by the time he got half way through. The eagerness on their shining faces - the complete lack of any confusion or guile - it was like looking into the face of Jesus Himself.

This is a precious Sacrament and if you don't understand it all don't worry. Just believe that it is a special meeting with the Lord, and from it you receive His grace.

Those of you who remember your Catechism will know that a sacrament is "an outward and invisible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." An outward and visible sign - in this case, the taking and breaking of bread, and the consecration of wine - it is something we can see and touch, which is the vehicle of something invisible and spiritual - the life and sacrifice of Jesus

"Given to us by God Himself, as a means whereby we receive the same (the grace) and a pledge to assure us thereof."

To finish this I want to read to you an oft-quoted passage from a book on the Liturgy titled "The shape of the liturgy" by a man called Dom Gregory Dix. It was our bible on liturgy when I was a student. Today's students often haven't heard of it, and some of our training colleges don't want to know about it. Preachers of the older generation love this. It is about the sacrament of Holy Communion.

"Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning, or for a bride and groom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of parliament of a mighty nation, or a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting for an examination, or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness that my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman tempted to return to fetish because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain So-and-So wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously for the canonisation of Joan of Arc, one could fill many pages why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.

And best of all, week by week, and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta dei - the holy common people of God."