

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity – Sung Eucharist, Sunday 12th August 2018

Fr George was a saintly retired priest whom I knew when I was an undergraduate in Canterbury, although he would have disputed the 'saintly' adjective. He suffered from Macular Degeneration and had very little sight left. Because he was unable to take services publicly, once a week, he was allowed to celebrate the Eucharist privately in one of the chapels in the Crypt of Canterbury cathedral. There used to be a group of us who took it in turns to serve for him. What was so exciting was that he used the Roman Rite, claiming that the altar missal was the only one that had print that was large enough for him to be able to read. To take part in something so illicit in, of all places, Canterbury cathedral was beyond thrilling for us undergraduates, and we all looked forward to serving for Fr George and being taken to the Cathedral Gate Hotel for coffee afterwards!

Anyway, the reason I am telling you about Fr George is that, once, upon leaving the cathedral, in the Buttermarket outside the cathedral precinct was a street preacher, berating any sacramental efficacy of the Eucharist. Unable to stand what he was hearing, Fr George interrupted, proclaiming that the preacher obviously didn't know his Bible. About to explode with rage, the preacher asked for further explanation. Fr George then explained that Jesus said that he was 'the Way, the Truth and the Life'. Indeed said the preacher proclaimed, 'he is the Way, the Truth and the Life', the Bible says so. 'The Bible also says that Jesus said 'This is my body and this is my blood' said Fr George, 'how can you accept one saying at face value and deny the truth of the other?' It is a method of reading the Bible and believing the words of Jesus that I have adopted ever since.

Except that in the Gospel passage under consideration today that isn't the case. Although I receive communion regularly, it would not be true to say that afterwards I don't become hungry or thirsty – in fact, after the morning services I am usually starving and need some breakfast fast! It is not possible therefore to take Jesus' words at face value and some serious interpretation needs to take place to understand exactly what is going on here in John's Gospel and how it might apply to us today.

As always, Jesus' words don't come out of nowhere, but refer to Jewish tradition, history and religious belief. Furthermore, he refers to the fact that, at the time he was speaking bread was the fundamental part of a meal. For the poorer people within society it was often life sustaining because it was often all that many people had to feed themselves with. To try to live without any bread often meant having to prepare to die. The importance of bread as being fundamental to a life sustaining meal can be found throughout the Old Testament. Building on this therefore, Jesus, by referring to hunger and thirst, is also referring to two events greatly important within the salvation history of the Jews. Firstly then, Jesus refers to Numbers chapter 11 where the Israelites have escaped from slavery in Egypt and are wandering in the desert, having no food, they complain; Moses then appeals to God who provides them with life sustaining manna. They soon become fed up of the manna and again complain and we are told that they are then supplied with quails for meat as well as the manna. The second incident refers to Numbers chapter 20 when the Israelites had journeyed to the wilderness of Zin. Here there is no water and the Israelites complain again that they have no water and that they would have been better off staying in Egypt. Moses again appeals to God and he is told to strike the rock with his staff and out came water that the people and livestock were able to drink. But all is not well, and we are told that because the Israelites had doubted God's promise, that that generation would not live to enter into the Promised Land, that would be for others in the succeeding generation.

Now in referring to himself as the Bread of Life with its associations with manna, and in the reference to flesh and quenching thirst, Jesus caused great offence to his hearers as he was obviously referring to himself as superseding these life saving sacred events that were of such extreme importance to the Jews that they are often referred to almost as a credal statement. Psalm 78 for example says: 'He struck the rock so that the waters gushed out and torrents overflowed, can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?' The inference here is only God can do these things. So almost every sentence that follows causes great offence to Jesus' listeners because of the claims that he makes of himself.

So what was going on here? You can imagine the reaction of the crowd when Jesus claims to be bread which came down from heaven. They know where he comes from, they know his parents! Jesus then makes matters worse by claiming that he has come down from heaven and personally knows the Father. Faith in him is what Jesus claims leads to eternal life. He compounds things further and says: 'your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died...I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of it they will live for ever; and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Now there is a lot to take on board here, and, as usual John crams theological meaning into every word which is deliberately placed. To get behind Jesus' words then, we need to understand three things.

Firstly that, although the life sustaining manna sustained the Israelites at a time of starvation, and, it is claimed was of divine origin, nevertheless it was of limited effect. Jesus tells us that he is the bread from heaven which gives life. Unlike the manna then which merely sustains, in receiving Jesus the Bread of Life we are receiving life at a different level to that which was offered by the manna. Those who ate the manna in the wilderness not only missed out on entering the Promised Land, but also on the life to come. Here in Jesus' statement what is being said is that as bread is to the body, so Christ is to the soul. Not only therefore does this bread merely sustain the body, but it imparts the very life of God which is a divine gift of grace, freely given - and this has implications not only for this life, but also for eternal life.

Secondly, any faithful Jew would have been familiar with the sacrificial worship offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. Sacrificial worship, like it or not, was central to the worship offered at the time. When a sacrifice was made, only a part of it was offered to God on the altar. Part of it was given to the priests and part of it was given to the people offering the sacrifice to make a feast and they would eat its' flesh which, it was believed, having been offered as atonement for sin, was now filled with the very spirit or essence of God. In eating the flesh of the sacrifice the recipients were therefore taking into themselves the very divine life or spirit. The temptation therefore to associate eating of Christ's flesh with cannibalism can only be refuted with full understanding of the sacrificial worship of the Israelites and in understanding the theology of it. Understanding is therefore given as to Jesus describing himself as bread from heaven which is his flesh.

Finally, of course, in referring to flesh, there is a reference back to the Prologue in John chapter 1, 'the Word was made flesh dwelt among us'. Here, as in all parts of John's Gospel there is further depth and understanding to be had. In making this connection therefore, John is making the point that Christ's entire humanity, by surrendering it to death upon the cross, is the means by which life is given to the whole world.

These notions are difficult to accept, and the Gospel passage urges us therefore to respond with faith. But even then, John's Gospel is truthful enough to acknowledge that many found it hard to accept what Jesus was saying and withdrew from following him. But the theology does make sense if we understand the context from which it comes, and in receiving Jesus the Bread of Life, we are receiving the life of God in so many ways and at so many levels. As you may recall from your confirmation classes, a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

And just in case you have found what I have said today to be complex, confusing, or even merely the usual disjointed ramblings of the Canon Precentor, I will leave you with these learned, timely and apposite words:

There once was a pious young priest
Who lived almost wholly on yeast,
'For,' he said, 'it is plain
We must all rise again
And I want to get started at least.'