

## Sermon 23 August

### **GOSPEL: John 6: 56-69**

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. 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.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 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. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, '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.'

### Sermon

There are some mysterious beings up there in the church hierarchy, who have quite a lot of influence on all our lives, because they are the people who write the lectionary, meaning that they decide which bible readings we will have from one Sunday to the next. I've never found out who they are; if I did, I would like a quick word. Anyway, whoever they are, they clearly decided that August 2015 was the time to discuss the Eucharist, because we have had a row of readings from John's gospel chapter 6, about Christ as the bread of life and what that might mean for us. And so I am now going to add another sermon on that subject.

Joking apart, it is a good idea to reflect from time to time on what we do when we celebrate the eucharist, because in this church we do that quite frequently and it mustn't become routine;

it is a lovely thing, but if we are not careful, as one of our Methodist colleagues reminded me the other day, frequent repetition can cause the celebration to lose its force.

It *is* a celebration, that's the first thing to say; it's always a thanksgiving, for Christ's great gift of himself for us.

It also has to be said that like all sacraments, it is a wonderful mystery, and something much better experienced than explained, which is why I don't usually attempt an explanation in confirmation classes (that's my excuse anyway).

Beyond a certain level, you just have to try it and see;

"Taste and see how gracious the lord is" is a very good motto for this, come to think of it.

Today's talk in three parts:

- transubstantiation (Dave mentioned this the other week, and I want to amplify what he said)
- some point about the gospel reading,
- and then a bit about our own practice here, and what will go on here later this morning.

I'm going to start at the deep end with doctrine of transubstantiation, which was the kind of thing people were killing each other about in this country somewhere around 1550,

- and it was very sad that the eucharist could cause such strife - but I have to say that the issue has gone off the boil a bit since then. People have been martyred for other things, but not, I think, for their views on precisely what happened to the bread and wine when they are consecrated at the eucharist.

Transubstantiation is, as I understand it, still the official Roman Catholic church teaching on the subject of what happens at the eucharist, but on the other hand the Anglican and R C bishops, after years of discussion, did manage to reach what they called "substantial agreement" (this is a pun, as you will see later) - on the subject of Eucharistic theology, and the language they were using was that of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharistic elements. "Real presence" is a different subject and I would like to talk about that at a different time.

The discussions came to an abrupt end when the Anglican church decided to ordain the likes of me - that is, women -

although I hope and believe that they have now started again. At any rate, it appears that transubstantiation is not the sticking point it once was.

What actually does it mean?

St Thomas Aquinas was mainly responsible for the idea, and he lived across the middle years of the fourteenth century.

He based his thinking on the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived about 1600 years earlier.

Mainstream classical Greek philosophy, meaning Aristotle, and Plato before him, and quite a lot of people after him,

spent a lot of time debating the nature of reality;  
in what way could different kinds of things be said to exist?

To give you a feel for the kind of thing which was going on:  
one question was; if a beautiful thing dies, does beauty itself also die? No; therefore beauty, which does not have a physical form of itself, does nevertheless exist, and clearly its existence is of a different order from that, for instance, of a flower, beautiful though the flower may be.

I'm not saying that is a conclusive argument for the existence of beauty –  
Just an illustration of the kind of mindset that was around in philosophical circles then.  
And actually, of course, philosophical enquiry is still around and is immensely relevant.  
There was an article in the Times yesterday: apparently scientists have succeeded in growing a small brain in a test-tube. Is the brain thinking, and if so what? How do we know?  
Discussions were about what is real – about different levels of reality.  
Things visible and invisible.

Aristotle then developed teaching about two levels of reality –  
He called them substance and accidents.  
the reality and the external appearance.  
The substance being the underlying reality,  
The accidents the external appearances.

So Christian thinkers like St Thomas Aquinas took hold of this:  
and so the teaching developed that an object can be changed as to its invisible and spiritual substance,  
whilst remaining the same externally;  
and so the wafer does become the body of Christ in substance, or in spirit if you like,  
and the wine – also in that way - becomes his blood.  
Some real and profound and irreversible change has taken place as the host is consecrated,  
while the outward appearance remains the same.  
And that, more or less, is transubstantiation;  
Which I don't have a problem with, really,  
partly because, oddly, this fits in with the visions of mystics,  
who can look at an object and experience the invisible reality behind it.  
That kind of visionary element is not part of orthodoxy, of course;  
but it is true that we must be able to accept that the eucharist is a great and profound mystery,  
and that things are not always exactly what they seem.

As I said, I don't know how much part of mainstream thinking transubstantiation is nowadays, but we might as well know!

Turn now to today's gospel, which is of course on a Eucharistic theme.  
*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.*  
And so on.

What are we to make of this?

One key to John's message is a word more familiar from a different time of year, namely Christmas, when we think about God becoming human in Christ, and that word is "incarnation".

The word "incarnation" imports a whole new set of ideas,

Ideas about the human form of Christ,

about the word of God became flesh;

St John chapter 1, the Christmas gospel: "the word became flesh" ...

this is Johannine theme,

and so, here,

"eat my flesh" means listen to my words, absorb me as the word of God, feed on the reality of me.

I note here, incidentally, a difference between Latin – derived and German –derived words in English.

"Carnivore" (Latin *caro*) in English sounds a lot nicer than "flesh-eater" (German *fliesch*), even though the words do actually mean the same. Why? The Latin is more abstract, less graphic. This is often the case with words derived from the two different roots, in English.

So "incarnation" as one key to St. John chapter 6.

Another key is to look at the whole content of the chapter,

which we have been reading over the last few weeks.

The whole of that chapter is concerned with the difference between physical food you can eat – the loaves and fishes –

and the spiritual reality behind them;

things visible and things invisible again, if you like.

Just to look back, we started about four weeks ago with FT5K (the feeding of the five

thousand), when Jesus fed an impossibly large number of people

with an impossibly small amount of food. And that of course got everyone very excited because it was a free dinner.

Yes, they were thinking, you really can have your fish and chips and eat it.

So Jesus then has to calm them down – the kingdom of God is not about free handouts for everyone for ever – it's a lot more serious than that –

which is why Christ says – (I quote) "it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless."

The reality is that Christ is the bread of life, the living bread which came down from heaven, in which all our hungers are satisfied.

So: remember incarnation – that Christ is the Word of God made flesh –

and remember also that the aim of this part of the chapter is to move the hearers away

from the physical towards the spiritual, using food as a sign, or a metaphor pointing beyond itself, if you like.

A question you might ask is, if we are talking on the spiritual level only, or mainly, Why

bother with the loaves and fishes? Why bother with the food, the practical demonstration, if we are only going to leave it behind?

Well, there are quite a lot of reasons for that.

One of them might be:

Christ was almost trying to deter, by using difficult language. Following him was going to be hard, it was not a picnic in the park. It says "Many of his disciples were turned back, and no longer went about with him." But not the twelve chosen disciples; they get the point. When Jesus asks them, "Do you also wish to go away?", Peter responds, "Master, to whom shall we go?" "You have the words of eternal life".

These are words which resonate with me, words I have often reflected on, when things get difficult. Actually, there is no choice.

Although even if the words are difficult, eating things is not difficult. You don't have to know a lot of theology to know that you are what you eat. So eating Christ, part of him becomes you. That bit is fairly obvious, really.

So we have thought about transubstantiation, and about John's message in chapter 6 of his gospel, all around the theme of the eucharist.

### The liturgy of the eucharist

One further point about what will be going on soon here this morning.

The bread and the wine for the communion are sitting at the back of church at the moment.

They represent the fruits of the earth, which are part of God's material creation, and as such are already part of the body of Christ, in whom the whole world is contained ("the fullness of him who fills all in all").

At the right moment someone whose job it is for today will pick them up and present them at the altar, where the bread and the wine will be offered on behalf of everyone, and at the same time we are offering our own selves to God.

At the altar, the priest consecrates the bread and wine using the eucharistic prayer. Some of the prayer varies, but it always contains the operative words:

"This is my body", and "this is my blood."

Whose body and whose blood? Well, those of the world we live in – which is sacred, and must always be treated as such. Those of the people who are here – make no mistake, you are making a commitment. That of the priest – in this case, me. But also and mainly and sacrificially, the body and blood of Christ on the cross.

And so we are offering back to God those things which are his anyway,

to be affirmed as part of Christ's body sacrificed on the cross,

This is serious stuff we are doing here.

I have just done quite a lot of talking – I hope it helped.

But in the end, the eucharist is not a problem to be explained, it is an experience to be enjoyed. So now we are going to listen to *O sacrum convivium*, a Eucharistic hymn set by Olivier Messiaen.