

Sermon for 18th August 2024, Year B, Proper 15

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Proverbs 9:1-6; John 6:51-58

Sermon

It's now the fifth Sunday of what I've taken to calling 'bread season', when we have this series of readings in which Jesus talks about his role as the bread of heaven who feeds us with his own presence. Preachers like me are now starting to run out of things to say about bread. Perhaps, we may think, it is time to look at the other readings and start talking about wisdom instead!

But if we turn to the book of Proverbs, we find there is no escape. Wisdom, depicted as a tender grandmotherly figure, invites the 'simple' to turn in and enjoy a meal of, yes, bread and wine, which are in her case metaphors for wisdom and insight.

Clearly this bread metaphor is not going away. It must be important – at least to the version of Jesus reported by the gospel writer John.

Although Jesus recently fed his followers by a miracle of multiplying the loaves and fishes, he made it clear that providing free food wasn't really the point of his mission. Instead, he insisted that he himself is bread from heaven, and that we should eat *him* if we want to live joyfully as part of God's family in the kingdom of heaven.

This is all very bizarre, and no one understands what he's talking about. If Jesus were studying for ordination today, he would have just failed his preaching test – the first rule of preaching being 'only use examples and analogies that everyone understands'. Jesus was usually very good at this – when he talks about sheep and shepherds and vineyards and tax collectors and Samaritans and so on,

everyone knows what he means, but what on earth does he mean when he says, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you”? It sounds like cannibalism.

To the Jews it was doubly offensive. Not only was consuming blood definitely not kosher, but Jesus seemed to be making a claim for exclusivity as well! You have to eat and drink *me*, he says, not that other rabbi, not the Pharisees, not the temple priests, just me.

As Christians over the centuries, we have responded to Jesus’ command by making the sharing of bread and wine in Holy Communion one of the central acts of our Sunday liturgy. We eat Jesus’ body – as represented by the bread, and we drink his blood – as represented by the wine, just as Jesus himself taught us at the Last Supper.

Maybe it’s not so complicated after all. We’re not literally eating Jesus, are we? Well, the Catholics of course say that we literally are eating Jesus through transubstantiation, and the Reformers say that we’re definitely not and it’s all purely symbolic thank you very much, and we Anglicans mostly try to have it both ways, declaring that we are truly consuming the body and blood of Christ, but in a spiritual way, not a literal one. Our liturgy is designed in such a way that whether your personal understanding of the Eucharist is more towards the Catholic or Protestant side of the argument, you can find words in the liturgy which support your view.

But I think the arguments about whether we’re literally eating Christ’s body and blood when we eat and drink the bread and wine are completely beside the point. What Jesus is asking of us is that we become so united with him that it is as if we had consumed his flesh and blood. It is a call to passionate commitment to everything Jesus is and does. It’s a call to become Christlike, heart and soul. ‘You are what you eat’, as the saying goes.

So many times in the gospels, Jesus tries to encourage his disciples towards a wholehearted commitment to self-giving love. If you put your hand to the plough but turn back, then you're not worthy of the kingdom, he says, using a nice easy metaphor that everyone understands. If you don't give up all your possessions, you can't be my disciple, he says. Sell everything you have, and give to the poor, then come and follow me, he says – something that the Franciscans took very seriously indeed. You must be born again of water and the spirit, or you won't be able to enter the kingdom, he says. And now, you must eat my flesh and drink my blood, or you won't have eternal life, he says.

If we want to follow Christ and be like him, we can't be half-hearted. None of us can understand Christ by sitting back in our seats and coolly considering him from afar, as if he were an interesting idea to be considered intellectually in a book club or a sermon. We can't dip our toes in the water and expect to be made clean, we must plunge into the deep end and completely immerse ourselves!

God's wisdom is always a lot more visceral and embodied than the pristine intellectual concepts of the philosophers that came before or since. To eat and drink of Jesus means becoming vulnerable, apologising for our selfish mistakes, giving up our privileges and status, coming forward, holding out our hands, chewing bread and gulping wine. Yes, the Greek words don't talk about a nibble and a sip, but a chew and a gulp!

Jesus is saying to those following him that faith is not about watching from a distance – even if you have all the right beliefs. It's about being united with God in body, mind, and soul; through prayer and worship certainly, but most importantly through action – through our relationships with others. This is what it means to eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood. We become part of him, and he is part of us. Not in a metaphorical sense but a real one. We are literally a new creation. We, together, are the Body of Christ. This is why, if I'm honest, I

always prefer receiving Communion in a semi-circle around the altar when it's possible, which emphasises that Communion is not just between me and God, but between me and all my friends and neighbours.

Jesus has come down from heaven with the intention not just of bringing us all back with him, but of transforming us to *be* him on earth.

By calling on us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, Jesus is asking us to choose to become Christ, to take on his compassion, his selflessness, his willingness to stand with the outcasts and risk the ruin of his own reputation for their sake. In a world beset with so much selfishness, cruelty and evil, what else could save us? No leaders are going to fix the world for us. It has to come from our own hearts and from our own hands.