

SERMON – 3/3/19**Thinking about Communion: The Bread of Life**

John 6:51-69

Jesus said, “I am telling you the truth: if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in yourselves. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him to life on the last day.” (John 6:53-54)

Over these last four weeks we have been thinking about Communion and preparing ourselves for this day that we have now come to. The invitation has been extended, the Table is set, and here we are, gathered and waiting to engage with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Bread of Life.

I want to keep what I have to say quite short this morning because I want our focus to be not so much on words *about* the Lord's Supper nor even on the sacrament itself in which we will share in a short while, but on the One we remember here, the One we proclaim here, the One for whom we give thanks here, the One in whom we find fellowship here – Jesus Christ the Bread of Life.

In John's Gospel there is no account of the institution of the Lord's Supper. John's account of the Last Supper focusses not on the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup but on Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet. But in John's Gospel we have the chapter from which we have read this morning which begins with the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle of Jesus to be recorded in all four Gospels, and continues with the ensuing episode of His walking on the water of Lake Galilee to join the disciples struggling in the boat against strong winds. There then follows, in the pattern of John's Gospel, an extended section of teaching which explores the deeper significance of what has just happened. As with other teaching sections in John, the one from which we have read today is not easy to digest because it uses startling images that really take us out of our comfort zone. It's interesting to note here in particular that Jesus' teaching provoked a very negative reaction amongst those who first heard it, so perhaps we should not be surprised when it stirs up a similar response in us in our day.

Did you notice these phrases in the reading? 'This started an angry argument among them.' (v.52) 'Many of His followers heard this and said

“This teaching is too hard. Who can listen to it?” (v.60) 'Jesus knew that they were grumbling about this.' (v.61) Jesus said, 'Some of you do not believe.' (v.64) 'Because of this, many of Jesus' followers turned back and would not go with Him any more.' (v.66) Although this scene takes place in the synagogue in Capernaum it is reminiscent of a similar incident in the synagogue of Jesus' home town of Nazareth where people are so incensed by what He has to say that they drag Him out of the town with the intention of throwing Him off a cliff.

Why should we assume that we will find Jesus' teaching straightforward when generations before us have struggled with it, including those who heard it from His own lips?

The primary issue in this morning's reading with which people have always struggled is the imagery Jesus uses about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. The early Church in Roman times was actually accused of practising cannibalism and there is a document that dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century that contains a dialogue between a Christian called Octavius and a pagan called Caecilius exploring this subject. Over the years I have known a number of folks in the church who have not been able to get past the language of the body and blood of Christ and who therefore do not participate in the Lord's Supper. Maybe I was foolish to take this reading for our text this morning if I wanted to encourage those who have thus far held back to come to the Table. It may not be the kind of language *we* would have chosen if we were writing about sharing in the new life that Christ brings, but the fact of the matter is that it is here in the Scriptures and we cannot just ignore it.

In fact this is one of these cases where the Old Testament is actually easier to read than the New. The Book of Exodus describes for us God's provision for His people Israel in the wilderness through the gift of manna – bread from heaven. How much simpler if Jesus had spoken in similar terms about the Bread of Life under the new covenant, food from heaven for the nourishment of souls. But He *doesn't*. He goes on at some length about the need for His followers to eat His flesh and drink His blood and that is the *very* thing that drives people away .

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What are we to take from that this morning? Well, we can recoil with horror or we can seek to engage. It seems to me that Christ is setting before us in the starkest way He possibly can the choice of two ways to live that runs like a golden thread through the whole Scriptural revelation from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem, through the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms to Christ and His apostles. The choice is between eternal life and no life at all. Jesus holds out the wonderful promise: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him” (v.56) and yet we read here of those who had been following Jesus turning back and giving up. The choice is between remaining with Christ and turning your back on Him. Jesus said, “What gives life is God's Spirit; man's power is of no use at all. The words I have spoken to you bring God's life-giving Spirit. Yet some of you do not believe.” (v.63-64) The choice is between accepting Jesus' words and living in the spiritual realm or concentrating on material things and having nothing to do with faith.

The choice is between following Jesus or not following Jesus. There can be no halfway house. Either we choose the flesh and blood of our own bodies, thereby turning our backs on Christ and having what He calls 'no life in you' or we choose the flesh and blood of Jesus, the Son of God, who came from the highest heaven to take on that human flesh and blood and to give it up to death for us on the cross, and we enter the spiritual realm, we remain in Him and we inherit eternal life. The key decision is whether or not to accept Christ and to follow Him. That was the choice He put before His first disciples: “He asked the twelve, And you – would you also like to leave?” (v.67) And Simon Peter answers, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. And now we believe and know that you are the Holy One who has come from God.” (v.68-69)

A wise old saint at a Scripture Union camp I was involved in many years ago offered me some advice I have never forgotten. When you are preaching the Gospel to the crowd, he said, make the appeal as appealing as you possibly can; paint such a picture of the loveliness of Christ that your hearers will long to know Him for themselves. But when an individual comes to you in response to your preaching and asks, 'What must I do to be saved?' then you need to put every obstacle you can in their way so that if

they do decide to commit their life to Christ it is because they are convinced that they can do nothing else.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let me point you beyond what we see and hear and touch and smell and taste with our mortal bodies to the One who calls us to step into a different realm altogether, and who invites us to taste and see that the Lord is good. Let me point you beyond the sound of my voice to the voice of the One whose words bring God's life-giving Spirit who enables all who come in faith to break bread and share the cup to share truly in the life and death and resurrection of Christ Himself.

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