

EATING AND DRINKING JESUS!

John 6.56-69

Sixty one years ago, my grandfather celebrated his 80th birthday by taking all his family out to dinner, and then to the theatre where we enjoyed Flanders and Swann in “At the Drop of a Hat”. It was all that time ago that I heard the ‘song of the reluctant cannibal’. It goes: ‘We don’t eat people... we won’t eat people... eating people is wrong...’

Some of us cringe when in today’s gospel reading we hear Jesus saying that we must ‘eat his flesh and drink his blood’. The idea sickens some people and others are angry. Some notable Victorian novelists stumbled so much over this concept that they would have nothing to do with Christianity.

SHOCKED

The Jewish people in the crowd, listening to Jesus teaching, would have been shocked at such sacrilegious ideas. They’d faithfully obeyed the Old Testament commandments including those important ones stressing that they must never, ever, consume blood. Blood was *holy*. When, sacrifices of living creatures were made to God, in the great Temple in Jerusalem, the *body* of an animal or bird offering was roasted – then some of it was put to one side as an offering to God, some was given to feed people serving in the Temple, and some might be returned to the worshiper.

But the command was crystal clear - blood was too holy to drink. It was often poured out onto the altar, symbolising returning life to the Creator who gave life. This Jewish prohibition on consuming blood in any form still stands today. In the whole multi-million pound business of producing kosher foods, fortunes

are made. Kosher food is guaranteed free of even the smallest trace of blood.

CONFUSED

So what are we doing here in church today, listening to Jesus' words in today's gospel (John 6.56) and hearing, 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them,' and then celebrating our Eucharist? We *may* understand, but it isn't as clear to everyone.

I'll never forget preparing a couple for their wedding. They weren't churchgoers, and so we suggested that they came to church to see what went on. After one service, I asked how it was for them? The man looked me in the eye and said, 'The Vicar's wife obviously can't be bothered to give him a proper breakfast – he's so hungry, he's stuffed every bit of left-over bread into his mouth as fast as he can, and gulped it down with the remains of the wine.'

Different people have different understandings of what might be going on at the altar during the communion service. My granddaughter, Elaine, reminded me that when she was younger, I'd explained that many people believe that this bread and wine, once consecrated, actually becomes Jesus' body and blood. So, it's precious and holy – to be treated with great respect. If a crumb falls onto the floor and gets accidentally stood on, (to such a person) it might seem as if as if Jesus' himself is being trampled on by hobnailed boots. If any wine is accidentally spilled, to them, it might feel like carelessly flushing Jesus down the drain. This is why, on the altar table, there's a small linen square, that's folded in a certain way so that when the Celebrant folds it up at the end of the service, any crumbs or splashes will be trapped in its folds and not tossed onto the floor. Precious, holy, to be treated with very great respect.

MISUSED

Elaine had also asked me why every remaining scrap of bread and wine was eaten at the end of the service. When I, personally, do this, I know it's safe and can't be misused. My friend, who lived out in the country, told me how marauders had come into her unlocked church, stolen the cross off the altar, and consecrated bread and wine from the vestry. They'd then used it for a black magic mass in the graveyard. If I know every trace of bread and wine has been swallowed, then I know it's safe and cannot be misused.

Others among us, will see the bread and the wine as *symbols* of Jesus' body and blood, given for us. We won't take the words and meaning *literally*, but we'll cherish the deep symbolic meaning behind it all. Symbols point to truths in ways that touch us more profoundly than anything else can.

It's hard to take on board what Jesus is communicating, isn't it? He says that he gives us his own self, to sustain us on our journey – these are hard words, hard to hear, hard to understand, and hard to believe.

DESERTED

No wonder many of Jesus' followers deserted him when he started talking like this. Have you realised that John in his gospel refers to the people not simply as 'the crowds,' as in earlier chapters, but here he speaks of 'disciples.' Those who now desert Jesus, are those who had formerly believed in Jesus – they'd followed him often at great personal cost. Now, finally, after all their waiting, watching, wondering and worrying, they've grown tired, and can no longer see clearly what it was that drew them to Jesus in the first place. So they leave.

Who can blame them. But are *we* all that different? I expect each of us has, at some time, wondered whether believing was a waste of time and energy. Was it all futile? In hospital, in the middle of the night, watching a child or grandchild giving up their fight for life... Waking up alone, and wondering why your partner died on you or walked out on you... Unexpectedly being made redundant and so on.

And we wonder where God is in all of this, and why things haven't turned out how we hoped they would - and whether they ever will.

I reckon that the picture John draws for us here is pretty realistic - an accurate portrait of disbelief, with Jesus surrounded by people who wanted to believe, who used to believe, who've been trying to believe, but have gone through the motions for a bit too long and have finally given up.

If you're one such person, then remember that Holy Communion is one of the places where we may find help. It's here that we may well encounter God afresh on a particularly meaningful way. .

Of course, this isn't the only place where we'll find God. Our world pulses with the presence and activity of its Creator: in nature, in government, in our family, in our work, in the benefits we receive from the work of others, in our gathering together as families, and here in church as a family of faith. In all these places, and more, God continues both to be present and also active - creating and sustaining the whole creation.

RETURNED

Yet we know how difficult it is sometimes to see God in these places. When nature turns violent or government goes corrupt, when the family is a place of discord and the church one of division, when all the things we usually count on come-up empty and we no longer know where to turn, *then* we may hear the

sacraments calling us back to see God clearly at work for us through bread, and wine, combined with God's amazing forgiveness, acceptance, and life.

Week in and week out, in the midst of all the craziness and haziness of life, it's incredibly helpful to come to church, and to be able to count on having the elements of bread and wine lifted up, that we might see and taste God's amazing promises of acceptance, forgiveness, and presence with us.

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