

Today, we are continuing with John's account of Jesus' sermon on eating the living bread which comes down from heaven. As a monthly preacher I am at a bit of a disadvantage when I come in like this in the middle of a conversation and I have no idea what was said about it last week or the week before. So you will have to forgive me if I repeat ideas you have already thought over and digested.

Having said that, the Gospel of John is not a straightforward narrative like Mark - John is much more circular in his writing style. Issues that have been addressed in one place get picked up and re-worked in another. So reading John can be maddening, but it can also be a way of reading meditatively, seeing the circle as a spiral of greater intensity and meaning, rather than just a circle of repetition.

Which is a good way to think about the gospel readings for August. They are all taken from this very circular sermon about eating the bread from heaven which is in fact Jesus.

But before we go there, I want to reflect a little on the first reading about Wisdom. Jesus is not the only one talking about food this morning. Wisdom also calls us to a feast, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." The dictionary tells me that wisdom is a mix of insight, good judgment, and knowledge, but for the people of Israel, wisdom stemmed from the knowledge of God. To know God and to be wise were essentially the same thing. So Wisdom invites us to eat her bread and drink her wine that we might know God and in the knowledge of God live and walk in the way of insight.

Most of the people Jesus was talking to would have known this passage, so as he talks about eating bread and drinking wine they probably made the connection with Wisdom. But in today's gospel reading there is a significant shift. Up until now Jesus has been talking about eating the

living bread - now he adds, "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

"...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

You will remember that John says at the very beginning of this gospel, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1:14,15) When God became human, God took on flesh and now Jesus is saying that when we eat that God-made-human flesh, we will have eternal life. In Jesus, God became flesh. And by eating, by participating in that flesh we get to have eternal life.

So let us ponder for a moment the meaning of eternal life. It clearly does not mean continuing in this life forever without dying. Eternal life is participating in the life of God who is eternal. That's why we eat and drink Jesus, because by doing so we are participating in the very life of God. We get physical life from our food because we are eating and drinking plants, and animals who have eaten plants - plants which have gained life from the sun through photosynthesis. And we sustain spiritual life, eternal life, when we consume the life of God in the flesh and the blood of Jesus.

This eternal life is not life in the sky when we die. Neither is it getting older and older in this life. It is life lived in and with God who is eternal. People of God, our true identity is in God, our true life is in the spiritual realms. But it is also here and now in all the messiness of life. Perhaps that is why Jesus is being so physical in his description. We are not called to step away from the physical world in a holy trance but to engage with Jesus in the flesh, in the stuff of this world.

I find this a very hard teaching. I would prefer to interpret all this within the sacramental and symbolic meal of the eucharist, but I think Jesus' focus on flesh and blood leads us to focus on the physical. The word he uses for eat in these verses is more like crunching or gnawing. This is not the polite consumption of a wafer and a genteel sip of wine. This is slurping and gobbling, this is savoring the food as we feed on Jesus.

Which is kind of gross.

It all sounds rather cannibalistic and of course if Jesus were talking literally, it would be cannibalistic. But Jesus' flesh is also the matter of the universe. It is made of stardust and sunlight, it is full of carbon and oxygen, of proteins and bacteria... just like us, just like all of creation.

So, what if one layer of what Jesus means is that eating him means fully engaging with our physical lives, with the flesh that we share with him? What if eating Jesus and drinking his blood means that there is no separation between the life we live trying to deal with our various infirmities and control the dust bunnies and love our neighbor all at the same time, no separation between the everyday and the eternal life we live in God?

But we, the people of God, journey through our everyday lives with the knowledge that we are also living the eternal life. We drink the wine and eat the food that Wisdom gives us; our life is hidden in Christ.

And that is why the eucharist is so central to our lives, because it reminds us that in the physical is the eternal. We do not just meditate in holy sanctuaries, leaving aside the physical for the sublime, though that is good to do; when we gather, we express and experience the love of God in the physical bread and wine which are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus poured out for us on the cross, a deeply physical act with amazing spiritual impact.

The bread and wine are not magical. They do not in themselves make us into Jesus, but they are sacraments – they are an outward expression of an inner grace – and as we physically and symbolically eat and drink the body of Christ, so we become the body of Christ – we are knit together in the one body whose head is Jesus.

Because this is a sacrament, it requires our participation as well as God's.

This is typical of God's grace – the love of God is freely given, eternal life is a gift but we have to choose to participate. We have to choose to eat the food that Wisdom has prepared. When we participate in the life that is Jesus we find that it is eternal life, life beyond the ages.

Just like we eat physical food regularly to sustain our bodies, so we get to choose to participate in the life of God not once but again and again, not knowing how we will be changed, not knowing how God works in and through us. And participating in that life is not just a holy separate Sunday thing but an everyday dealing with the messiness of being human thing. Because crunching Jesus' flesh and slurping his blood is all about the messiness of being human-in-God.

And then we find that, as Irenaeus said, the glory of God is the human being, fully alive.