

PENTECOST 12B, 15-08-2021. *The Reverend Lorna Green*

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:11-21;

John 6:51-58

(Jesus said) 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 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.'

We are talking about bread again! I mean, I like bread as much as the next person- apart from those with gluten intolerance of course- and hot toast is a wonderful thing; but why does Jesus talk so much about bread in John's Gospel? And why does our lectionary give us four weeks of readings about bread?

John's Gospel differs in many ways from the other three gospels in our Bible; it is more poetic, uses more metaphorical imagery, and it repeats itself- a lot. John's repetitiveness is a sign that what is being said is important.

It is also a sign that what is being said is hard for us to grasp, so John keeps hammering away at us, hoping we will understand that when Jesus talks about 'bread' he is not talking about flour, water and yeast, but about something that has 'come down from heaven'.

When Jesus talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood he is not speaking literally; he is referring to the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. John's Gospel was written to Christians who already knew the story; they were believers who had been cast out, rejected and hated by their Jewish families, neighbours and friends.

The Eucharist or the Lord's Supper is Jesus' gift to the church, and through the church to the whole of creation. But these words of Jesus were horribly difficult for his listeners to understand and accept, as he spoke about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. They were deeply offensive to Jewish people and are still hard for us to understand.

One commentator has this to say:

'If these shocking words of Jesus mean anything in the life of the church, then at the least they mean that when we eat and drink at the holy Table, eternity has broken into time in a unique, unrepeatable way. Eternity keeps on dipping into our time. Our memorial feast of bread and wine joins us with the living Christ, who is forever- and thus joined to him, we are forever.

We who belong to (and with) Christ in this feast are in a community that is eternal- made so not by any human doing but only by the action of the One who laid down his life for the sins of the cosmos. "O Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us."

When we gather together to receive communion we step outside of time and into eternity, surrounded by the Communion of Saints. No wonder we see the Eucharist as the central act of worship for us as Anglicans.

What does the Anglican Church have to say about communion?

The Catechism, which you can find at the back of A Prayer Book for Australia, teaches us about Christian faith and conduct in question and answer form. Once upon a time, people being prepared for Confirmation had to learn the Catechism: did anyone here?

Q. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.

Q. What is the Holy Eucharist?

A. The Holy Eucharist is the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again.

Q. Why is the Eucharist called a sacrifice?

A. Because the Eucharist, the Church's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, is the way by which the sacrifice of Christ is made present, and in which he unites us to his one offering of himself.

Q. By what other names is this service known?

A. The Holy Eucharist is called the Lord's Supper, and Holy Communion; it is also known as the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, and the Great Offering.

Q. What is the outward and visible sign in the Eucharist?

A. The outward and visible sign in the Eucharist is bread and wine, given and received according to Christ's command.

Q. What is the inward and spiritual grace given in the Eucharist?

A. The inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith.

Q. What are the benefits which we receive in the Lord's Supper?

A. The benefits we receive are the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.

Q. What is required of us when we come to the Eucharist?

A. It is required that we should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people.

That is the reason we say a prayer of confession each week before receiving communion.

Catholic and Reformed Christians do not always agree about various aspects of Holy Communion; you will know that some churches use individual cups, some use grape juice rather than wine, some only celebrate communion occasionally.

Some emphasise the 'real presence' of Christ in the bread and wine- others not so much. These are matters of tradition and preference and are of varying importance.

We are currently prevented from sharing the wine because of the global pandemic; I have no idea when medical and scientific advice may give us permission again and what that might look like. Anglican theology places great importance on sharing the common cup- as Jesus did at his last Supper; and that is deemed too risky right now. Be assured that taking just the bread means our Communion is just as valid. Jesus spoke of bread and wine as symbolising his flesh and blood. John's gospel tries to convey the deep reality of what this means; the reality of communion with God that lies within the simple physical elements.

Holy Communion represents so much for us. We approach the altar, coming to God with open, empty hands, to receive this gift that connects us to eternity. We join with the communion of saints, the invisible multitude that exists outside of time and surrounds us as we gather. There is radical equality in this celebration as everyone is invited and all are welcome, regardless of race, culture, gender, age, economic status or anything else, providing a model of Christian fellowship and our life as followers of Jesus.

The Lord be with you.