

St Brandon's, Sermon for 18th August 2024.

Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58

"Body and Blood"

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Having a sermon to write can mean I suddenly find it a lot easier to answer those emails I was putting off than do the task in hand. I'm sure you are familiar with the way, faced with a challenge, everything else in comparison seems more compelling!

Today's reading from Ephesians and John sit together a bit like that, the one is easier but the other more essential.

I can relate these two readings to the way we often want to share our worship and faith with those on the fringe of church, those who may or may not be open to seeing God more deeply, those who join us for a one-off service in celebration of a festival or personal occasion. In these services we are very relaxed about singing hymns, especially if they are well-known, give an accessible message and even better, have been chosen by the key players. We are a lot more coy about sharing the Eucharist and the shocking language and imagery of consuming body and blood. Singing is very understandable and an experience shared in a similar vein in the secular world. Holy communion is mysterious and incomprehensible and can only start to be understood from a faith perspective and has no parallel in the secular world, though the experience, I would argue, is on offer to all.

That said, this is not going to be about the outsiders' experience and how we view or serve our visitors and fringe attenders but about how we might experience these two elements we meet most Sundays. About the part each plays in our service.

Starting with the easier part, the hymns and psalms, the singing. Whether we have a tuneful or an off-key voice, most of us find the action of singing a physically relaxing and releasing action. Losing our individual voice into the mix and being part of a bigger voice singing approximately in unison is an expression of us coming together, so we sing at the start of a service to literally gather ourselves together in the combined intention of worshipping. Each Sunday, a lot of thought has gone into the selection of hymns, so that the words and mood support the theme of the readings. If you are someone who can focus on the words and enter into the sentiments fully, they may inform the theme of the day and give another slant to the interpretations of the readings that are being drawn out in other parts of the service. Sometimes, the words of hymns simply make us smile to ourselves or baffle us with archaic or prosaic sentiments that we can't readily relate to. Hymn singing is the overflow of arriving and presenting ourselves with hopeful hearts and helps turn our minds towards God and the longing we feel and cannot pinpoint. It sets us thinking and evokes memories, places, people and situations: in short, hymns help open our minds and hearts towards receiving God. Paul is right when he says they can counter evil thoughts – the uplifting nature of most hymns is able to channel us towards our better selves and away from despondency and withdrawal.

Hymn singing puts us in a receptive state then, for the scripture and reflection – the sermon and our personal hearing of God's word, how the message lands today and what it seems to be saying or prompting us to think. Hymns carry us into the praying and out in a final hymn of (usually) joyful noise to do that thing we are bid of 'Going out to love and serve the Lord.'

So why do we most Sundays punctuate the flow of word and heart with this ritualised mini-meal? What is the place and rationale for that? Why hear virtually the same words each and every time, and go through the same actions?

The strong and shocking language that Jesus uses in today's gospel reading should make us sit up and pay attention even if the words of the Eucharistic prayers, so

familiar, only wash over us week by week. Jesus is being ritualistic and radical here, and perhaps that's a new invitation for how we approach the eucharist today.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all variously describe a last supper at which Jesus acknowledges his betrayer, and gives thanks to God for bread that he then shares with them, telling them it is his body he is giving. He gives thanks to God for the cup that he then offers to them as his blood poured out for many, with which he is sealing his new promises of forgiveness, of his kingdom coming. These are the words that are recited as the central theme of the Eucharistic prayer, the story-line that sits at the heart and centre of our faith.

The gospel of John doesn't have the story of the last supper, instead, Jesus's crucifixion coincides with Passover and sets up parallels of sacrificial lambs, the significance of blood in cleansing temple rituals, and in being the life-essence, and means of removing sin. All too much to unpack now but suffice to say that the passage we heard today is central to the meaning of the bread and wine we set on the altar today.

I find John's words represented most effectively in the culmination of the Eucharistic prayer, when we pray, "as we eat and drink these holy gifts... Renew us by your spirit, inspire us with your love, and unite us in the body of your Son ... through him, and with him, and in him..."

This for me expresses something of what Jesus is saying here in John's gospel about the dynamic of this sacrament. Jesus is spelling out that he going to become the physical means of engaging with us. His physical human flesh body that is both fully human and fully of God, is going to become available to us through the actions of the Eucharist. If we choose to receive him spiritually we are also invited to receive him physically in the bread that is of his body, and the wine that is of his blood. In this passage from John he spells out in graphic terms

how his body and blood will be food for us. How, through eating his body and drinking his blood he will become a part of us and we a part of him: “Will abide *in* me, and I *in* them.”

It is shocking, not least, because of a repulsion at what presents as cannibalism at its crudest level. But when did you ever hear of anyone offering themselves to be eaten? Is this not closer to the language of lovers than of enemies? The mother that suckles the baby and whispers, ‘I want to gobble you up you are so gorgeous.’ The consuming desires and actions of the entwined lovers, expressing their need to be in and of the other. Is this not the fierceness and shockingness of the language of Jesus as he says, “*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*” Jesus who loves us as he loves his Father; a fierce, complete, bottomless love that demands a response from us, demands that we partake with him and of him in that which he longs to give us.

The protestant church is wary of being too specific about exactly what is on offer as the priest distributes the bread and wine. It refers to memorials and remembrance. This caution is born from the worry that claims of power bordering on magical are being enacted, that, since there is no visible evidence of any alteration in the state of the wine and bread as a consequence of being prayed over, it is unhelpful to infer too much. I’m all for letting God do whatever work he can and chooses through these elements and not to worry overmuch about analysing it. Jesus did not address the disputing Jews who asked, “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” Instead, Jesus redoubled his assurance that we are to believe that his living Father sent him, and that true aliveness would be made available to us through the bread and wine that are of his body and blood.

We all know that food is the stuff that gives us energy, makes us grow, enables us to be healthy and fit; what could more accurately describe the effect in us of a developing knowledge of God? A knowledge that turns us towards his world, his working out of his kingdom where justice, mercy, and love are the governing forces.

When Jesus had finished talking to the Samaritan woman at the well, in John chapter 4, his disciples urge him to eat the provisions they've brought back with them but he declines saying, "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.*"

This is the satisfying nature of God: doing those things which are in accord with his will brings its own vigour and energy, its own growth and completeness, and helps us become the people he created us to be. It is the same expression of feeding on God, his father, as he is inviting us to do in perpetuity through the Eucharist, through making Holy communion with him. That is why it is placed towards the end of the service so that, with hearts and minds opened by hymns, scripture, reflection and intercession, we can desire most fully to receive him and take him *in* us and us *in* him, back out into the world, newly determined to do his will, and alive in love.

Amen