

Sunday Homily

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

15 AUGUST 2021

YEAR B

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood
abide in me, and I in them.”

John 6:56

Illustration

A newly married couple, thrilled with the automatic bread-maker given them as a wedding present, looked forward expectantly to waking to the smell of freshly baked bread wafting from the kitchen.

They quickly became accustomed to that delicious homely aroma as they put their present to immediate use. The wonderful smell of newly baked bread, however, was never quite matched by the quality of the bread itself. They followed the instructions meticulously but somehow the bread seldom came out as intended. The loaves barely rose, and were sometimes a soggy mess. Oh dear!

Determined not to be beaten, they reread the instructions and (in the small print!) discovered some helpful hints, among them a firm recommendation that a special sort of yeast should be used in bread-makers.

Thereafter they woke to the smell, and the taste, of excellent, wonderful crusty loaves – and marvelled at how a small amount of one simple ingredient could be so important, so vital, and make such a difference.

Gospel Teaching

John, as so often, is not seeking to report Jesus' words with strict accuracy, but to convey the real significance of what Jesus said. In our Gospel reading today he recounts Jesus' teaching about spiritual food.

Jesus uses bread – a symbol of daily life, a very simple, basic but vital commodity – to make his point. He describes himself as the “living bread”, bread that “came down from heaven”, and he emphasises that whoever eats this bread will live for ever. His listeners, perhaps not surprisingly, challenge this, thus giving Jesus the chance to reiterate that he is talking about spiritual food, and about eternal life, life beyond the frontier of death. It is the eternal life of Jesus within those who believe which holds out the promise of life for ever.

The Jews would have had some understanding of the concept of “bread from heaven” for they knew of the manna that had sustained their ancestors during their desert exodus (even if it had not extended their lifespan beyond the normal

expectation). What was this bread from heaven Jesus was talking about, that would enable them to live for ever?

If this was not sufficiently challenging to them, Jesus' listeners were thrown by his talk of "those who eat my flesh". He wasn't advocating cannibalism, was he? And as for drinking blood, did he not know that the strict Jewish food rules and rituals forbade this?

Of course Jesus knew these rules, but his challenge was intended to get his listeners to look beyond their earthly needs, beyond their stomachs to their spiritual needs, and beyond their restricting rituals to new life within each of them.

Application

Jesus most certainly is not advocating cannibalism and the eating of his actual flesh but is inviting his listeners then – and us today – to feed on his humanity. "Fill your heart, your mind, your soul, your very inner being, with me." is what he is saying.

Reworking an image sketched by the much-loved and respected theologian William Barclay, try to imagine a man surrounded by well-stocked bookcases. Much knowledge is available to him in those books, but as long as they remain on the shelves – unread – all this array of knowledge is outside him, beyond him. But when he takes a book from the shelves, opens it and reads it, it becomes part of him. It fills his mind and his imagination; some parts fire his heart; others lift his spirits. Thereafter, whether the book is in his hand or on the shelves, he is able to feed on it, on its wisdom, knowledge, inspiration.

So it is with Jesus. When we take him into our hearts, consume him, then we are able to feed on him, and all that he offers. So, too, with his blood. Jesus' divinity was to take him beyond death, beyond the cross, to new life, and all who drink of him share this life, everlasting life with Jesus himself.

In our re-enactment of Jesus' command at the communion table we eat bread and drink wine, representing the broken body of Jesus and the blood he spilled for us. The bread remains bread, the wine remains wine, but by consuming it in faith, we take Jesus' body and blood, his humanity and his divinity, into ourselves, into our very being. He becomes part of us, as we become part of him.

A small piece of bread, and the merest sip of wine, simple, natural everyday things – and yet so important, so vital, and they make such a difference.