

*‘this is my body’*  
 a sermon preached on the  
*the eleventh sunday after pentecost*  
 9 August 2015  
 at  
*st john’s*  
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
 by the reverend dr brian porter

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2; John 6: 35, 41-51

“Jesus said: I am the bread of life... 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” (John 6: 51).

Today’s date means a lot to me. It’s my son Patrick’s birthday. 39 years ago it was 9.8.76, a date easy for him and Muriel and me never to forget. Who of us can ever forget the birth of our first child? Those memories for the mother are of a quite different order to the memories of her husband. I can remember quite vividly the scene in the delivery room in the Canberra Hospital as this bundle of new life emerged into this mortal coil. Even more vividly do I remember driving home in the car saying to myself: “I am a father. Nothing will be the same again.”

Then a whole series of memories flash back in my recollections of Patrick’s growing up: the little boy learning to walk and to talk. His receiving Holy Communion from the Archbishop for the first time at his confirmation. His time at school and universities. His first wedding in New York and the solemn profession of his wedding vows on that day and making his communion for the first time as a married man at that wedding. Memories...memories! And in January next in icy Oxford we will be going through it all again and I know that he will make his communion on his second wedding day once again and with equal dedication.

But even precious memories fade. I currently know that only too well because I have recently been diagnosed as suffering from early onset Alzheimer’s disease. One of the first signs of this disease is memory loss. My physician assured me as I went through a brain scan X Ray machine that the seven white spots which represent irrecoverable memory loss will not proliferate for a few years because of the powerful drug she has prescribed for me. When I reach my early 80s however or when new drugs on which she is working as a world authority have reduced their efficacy and lost their power, I will inevitably move into the dark final stage of dementia as Norman Curry did recently at Broughton Hall and went on to that rebirth into eternity which is the common destiny of all of us. What will eternity be like I once asked Norman? Dear old Archbishop Frank Woods replied to that same question: “My bags are packed!”

Enough of all that. Let’s, as in duty bound turn our attention to the words of Jesus in this morning’s Gospel. It’s another of the six bread passages which crop up every three years at this time: “I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”.

Puzzling isn’t it. Flesh and blood. Little boys I have taught have sometimes quizzed me about this. “Chaplain, does this mean that we are cannibals? Flesh and

Blood! Ugh!” In Christian history parents and teachers and learned theologians have gone through hoops to help enquirers distinguish between the literal and the symbolic; the Real Presence has figured as the opposite of a Real Absence which some Protestant expositors have developed by way of contrast. I remember visiting St Andrew’s Cathedral in Sydney as a spikey young Anglo-Catholic server, well- trained by MCs like our dear Ross and being amazed to see carved in the stone reredos behind that Cathedral’s Holy Table another scriptural verse referring to the Risen Christ: “He is not here; he is Risen”. Martin Luther, the great Protestant polemicist wrote on the blackboard in his lecture room in Wittenberg in Latin the phrase: “Ist est ist!” (Is means Is!) and the great first Queen Elizabeth who believed fervently in the Real Presence wrote of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament:

His was the Word that spake it  
He took the Bread and brake it  
Therefore I do believe and take it.

The history of the Eucharist in Christian experience occupies a whole shelf in the libraries of Popes and Patriarchs, Primate Archbishops and Bishops, Deans and Archdeacons, Canons and Rural Deans, Vicars and Curates, Chaplains and Rectors and Vicars, let alone Abbots and Professors, Evangelists, and wait for it, even pious members of the laity in all the places of what was once known imperially and regally as Christendom. This historical overview / perspective is no better expressed than in Dom Gregory Dix’s famous passage from his magisterial volume *The Shape of the Liturgy*<sup>1</sup> to which I was introduced in theological college. I have printed it on the front page of today’s *Contact* in the hope that you will keep it in your small collection of precious papers or under your blotter.

One Greek scholar comments that Jesus uses a powerful word for eating: the word means to gnaw on something, to eat with gusto, really relishing the food. So Christians are called to be satisfied with more than a mere taste of Jesus, but to chew over the cud of the Sunday sermon and to want more and more, to absorb as much as possible of the life of Jesus into their own lives. For this reason I now ask you each to turn to your copy of today’s *Contact* where I have had printed on the front cover Dom Gregory Dix’s memorable words, which make up, in my opinion one of the finest passages of English prose in existence. Listen as I read it with due emphasis and, dare I say it, with appropriate gusto:

Was ever such a command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance and need, from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. People have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to the old gods because the

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<sup>1</sup> © 1945 Dom Gregory Dix

crop had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and so, wounded and a prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively by an exiled bishop who had hewed timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously for the canonisation of St Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done these things, and not tell a hundredth of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unflinching, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Die* – the holy common people of God.

Amen