

eat me!
a sermon preached on the
thirteenth sunday after Pentecost
23 August 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Eat me!

Not 'think about me'. Not 'read about me'. Not even 'imitate me'. All that, yes of course – but these are not enough. Eat me! The work of God is believing in Jesus – and 'believing in Jesus', according to John the Evangelist,¹ means *eating* him. Eat me – and live.

With the exception of last Sunday's Mary feast, we have been reflecting upon this astonishing teaching for five Sundays. And now, at the end of chapter six we hear ourselves incomprehending and scandalised: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"² "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"³ And Jesus' question *then* remains his question *now*: "Does this offend you?"⁴

It has been said that Christianity is the most material of all religions. The technical word is Incarnation – *in-carne*, en-fleshment. As one spiritual teacher puts it: Matter matters. Being a disciple of Jesus is a *bodily* affair. This is probably why all attempts to work out the Christian gospel up in the head alone – especially its dogmas and doctrines – inevitably lead into dry, dusty places, to incomprehension and distortion, even spiritual abuse.

This is perhaps why the liturgy of the Word is only *half* of Christian worship. The liturgy of the Word on its own is all words and concepts and ideas. And in the hands of the extreme protestantism is nothing but words, words, and yet more words. Whereas Christian worship requires flesh – not just what's up in the head, but incarnation, enfleshment, the flesh and blood of bodies. Which means it requires the senses, all of them. Sacred images and symbols to *see*. Music and words to *hear*. Fragrances and incense to *smell*. Water and oil and wood and feet to *touch*. Bread and wine to *taste*. Taste life – eat me! Does this offend you?

John's chapter six perfectly illustrates the hopeless error in literalism – in the so-called literal interpretation of Scripture. (Actually, I have yet to meet a true literalist.) As the great early church teachers realised, Scripture has multiple layers of meaning, of which the literal is just one – indeed, which on its own hardly makes sense, and always leads to distortion and spiritual bullying.

Only some parts of Scripture should be taken literally. Today's text from the letter to the church at Ephesus⁵ makes the point. Paul clearly had in mind an inner battle, a wrestling with the spiritual powers. However it wasn't long before, taken literally, Constantine turned 'the Way' of Christ into empire Christianity, which later became sword-and-shield wielding Crusade Christianity, the dark consequences of which continue to poison our relationship with Islam. As the early teachers knew and taught, much of sacred Scripture only makes sense *symbolically*. Here's Augustine of Hippo: "The presentation of truth by emblems [symbols] has a great power; for, thus presented, things move and kindle our affection much more than if they were set forth in bald statements."⁶

Eating, then, when symbolically understood, is about assimilation. It means something must be consumed – must be chewed over, swallowed, digested, its nutrients absorbed into the whole of the body. The truth of Christ must be consumed: it cannot be worked out in the head as ideas to be merely 'believed in'. Christ incarnate is about bodily transformation. Eat Christ – and live!

¹ John 6:29

² John 6:52

³ John 6:60

⁴ John 6:61

⁵ Ephesians 6:10-17

⁶ John A Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New York: Herder, 2001, p155.

You must eat me – this is the hard teaching of Jesus. You can think what you like about me, he says to us. You can quote all the Scriptures which gesture towards me. You can feel group solidarity with the masses who mistake the truth about me for superficial warmth or mere spectacle. But all this is spiritual short-cut. This is not me. If you desire me, he tells us, you must consume me. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them”.⁷ Does this teaching offend you?

Indeed, the inner truth of Jesus’ teaching can only be grasped with the symbolic imagination. If you desire me, he says, you must assimilate me, you must chew on my flesh, so that it becomes your flesh – so that you yourselves become my flesh. This is what it means to ‘abide’ in him.⁸

This astonishing *evangelion* is even more far-reaching into our flesh: you yourselves, he says, must make a communion not only with me, but with your very selves, because your flesh and my flesh are one.⁹ Thus, making a communion with yourself is making a communion with me, and a communion with me is a belief in God, and a communion with the whole creation.¹⁰

St Augustine of Hippo grasped this when he declared to those coming to receive communion: ‘Say Amen to what you are!’¹¹ St Irenaeus of Lyon got it, when he taught that ‘Christ became as we are, that he might make us what he is’.¹² As the ordinary matter of bread and wine is transformed into the Real Presence of Christ at the Altar, so is the disciple to be transformed at the Altar, into Real Presence as his living Body, who all share in the one bread.¹³

“You are the body of Christ:

that is to say, in you and through you
the work of the Incarnation must go forward.

You are meant to incarnate in your lives the theme of your adoration –
you are to be taken, consecrated, broken and distributed,

that you may be the means of grace and vehicles of the Eternal Charity.”¹⁴

Thus, Eucharist is crucial to Christian proclamation. At every Eucharist – and in the whole of our lives to be lived eucharistically – *we* are to be so transformed at the Altar: *we* ourselves are to be taken, blessed, broken, and given.

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⁷ John 6:56

⁸ John 15:4

⁹ John 14:20, 17:11,22-23

¹⁰ John 1:3

¹¹ “If you are the body and members of Christ, it is your mystery which is placed on the Lord’s table; it is your mystery you receive. It is to that which you are to answer ‘Amen’, and by that response you make your assent.” St Augustine of Hippo Sermon 272, in Henry Bettenson (ed) **The Later Christian Fathers: A selection from the writings of the Fathers from St Cyril of Jerusalem to St Leo the Great**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, 244.

¹² R P C Hanson, ‘St Irenaeus’, in Alan Richardson (ed), **A Dictionary of Christian Theology**, London: SCM, 1969, p175.

¹³ Holy Communion Second Order, **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p141.

¹⁴ St Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Michael Mayne, **This Sunrise of Wonder: Letters for the Journey** (new ed.), London: Darton Longman Todd, 2008, p298.