

Sermon 20th Sunday in OT

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them”. Again, the Gospel of Johns repetitive nature seems to wash over us like waves on a beach, as if we must not only hear this message once, but in fact must be consumed by it and perhaps consume it ourselves.

These words are yet another set of difficult sayings, and we have now had 4 weeks of them. They are characteristically John, words that urge the reader to open their mind and their hearts to different realities and different perspectives. It is about not just understanding the life of Jesus Christ as John

saw it, but about us experiencing it, embodying it, living it.

This seems to be the Gospel intention.

It is about as it has been these past weeks, about the theme of incarnation, God becoming flesh, a human being, a living sacrament. The God of hospitality, the God who becomes one of us in order to sit around a table to eat, talk and be present. It is in fact a lot like our own meal times, times when family gather, friends reacquainted, memories shared, food eaten and hunger satisfied. This similarity between what Jesus is ‘on about’ in this section of John and our meal times is seen in the fact that they are both at their core, ritual actions.

We may not identify a meal with our family as a ritual, but in essence, this is what it is. It is something that has a shape to it, a set of values, where actions and symbols point to greater meanings. It is a place where people gather who share a connection and through the ritual, relationships are strengthened and reconnected.

Evelyn Underhill was an English mystic writer who lived in the first half of last century. She wrote extensively on ritual, worship and symbols. In her book “Worship” She describes ritual as “having a twofold quality, which closely parallels our human situation. In their living state they have an outside and an inside; a visible action and invisible action, both real, both needed, and so closely interdependent that each loses its true quality if torn apart.”

When we gather to eat with friends and family we are signifying an invisible bond of love, affection. Even genetics. When we do not connect in this way, gathering, eating and drinking I suspect our bonds would be slowly torn apart.

For the community to which the Gospel of John was written for, this sense of family and ritual were essential to their identity as followers of Christ. This is because some scholars propose that they had themselves experienced been ‘torn apart’ by been ostracised by the Jewish community. Hence, the often negative use of the phrase “The Jews” throughout John’s gospel. The Gospel it seems was written to a particular group of ‘insiders’.

Evidence of this is the Jews question “how can he give us his flesh to eat” which is a riddle whose answer is obvious to the insider, but shrouded to the outsider, not to mention offensive to any devout Jew.

For Jews, incarnation was not in their religious framework. Though God was involved in their daily lives through the action of the temple, the idea that he would become a human being was not on their ‘radar at all’.

And in fact, who can blame them? For it is so often against our own natural, normal, widespread expectations of what is spiritual and religious. Often mysticism has an appeal due to the fact that the incarnation is so difficult to confront. So

much in fact, that it seems Jesus has to reiterate to us that “Flesh” (life in this world) is where this God deems to meet us.

Just as you will not know your family and friends if you do not spend time with them, eat with them, weep with them and experience life with them, it is the same when we meet with God. We will not be able to comprehend Jesus by simply sitting back, comfortable in our pew, and coolly considering him as if he were an abstract, disembodied idea. Incarnation means we must get up, come forward, hold out empty hands, sip wine, eat bread and participate in the communities actions. Today’s gospel intends to tell us that Jesus wants to have all of our body, our soul and us. His

truth wants to be buried deep within us, we are to consume
him.

Amen

Therefore, I encourage us on two fronts this morning. One, is to make sure that in our own lives and in the lives of our family's we have rituals which bring us together in order to share a common bond of love and affection.

Secondly, we must remind ourselves repeatedly, that worship and ritual are not mechanical actions, but as Evelyn Underhill writes, are the same as "those who deliberately smile and are rewarded by an increase in cheerfulness, so those who deliberately kneel are rewarded by an increase in worshipping love."

Here God is waiting; let us approach him in peace.