

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 21 B BIRKENHEAD

I enjoy words. What I mean by that is I enjoy crosswords, especially cryptic ones, and I do make jokes with words but they are not as clever as some peoples. Of course my work is about words, preaching and teaching demand them.

2

Words can be difficult. They don't always convey what we mean. Others may have a different understanding of the meaning of words, even ones we think are clear.

Sometimes we convey our thoughts without using words. Music, painting, and dance are some ways we can convey thought without

words. The great ballerina Pavlova was once asked, "What did that dance mean". She replied, "If I could tell you in words, I wouldn't have bothered to dance it!" We too use our bodies to convey what we mean. People wave their arms, use facial expressions, move from foot to foot, and all this is part of the way we convey what we want someone else to know.

3

But words remain the main means of communication for most of us. In spite of their lack of precision and sometimes even conveying the opposite of what we mean, we will still use words to communicate with each other.

The limitation of words becomes obvious when we try to talk about God. How can words describe

that which is beyond our comprehension; that which is beyond speech? If I have an experience of God, if I try to talk about the divine, I generally use phrases which say God was like something else. We use metaphors and similes because of the difficulty of talking about the unknown.

4

When we do speak about God and our experience of God we often reveal the sort of God we believe in. A person once said to me, "I've been sick and haven't said my prayers. I hope God will forgive me." What sort of God did this person believe in? One who wouldn't even let them off the normal routine while they were ill? Is that really what the person meant? We do need to take care when we speak about God.

The church sometimes speaks the word of God and the words it uses turns people away. We all know of those who threaten to leave or cancel their pledges because the church attempts to relate the word of God to the political and social realities of our day. People get upset and sometimes leave when the church tries to keep up to date in order to be a better instrument for the proclamation of God's word in our world.

5

Jesus was the word made flesh. Yet his words also offended. People sometimes turned away because of what he said. Not all his words were sweetness and light. His parables were difficult to understand and hard to explain. Even his disciples had to be taken aside to have the meaning explained. Jesus too had difficulty with words. That's probably why he left his disciples with actions to do, as well as words to speak.

In today's gospel, many said, "this is intolerable language." They were referring to Jesus suggestion that people eat his flesh and drink his blood. This was unheard of in Judaism. Blood was something to be treated with respect and used in sacrifice, but it was not for drinking.

6

Jesus words may sound like cannibalism but they are definitely not. That would be really offensive and I don't think Jesus set out to deliberately offend people. He was trying to convey something which was really beyond what words could express. It was extreme language and sometimes that is the only way to get a message across. Sometimes that is the only way to get people to think.

If we think about it the words flesh and blood, or as we usually say, body and blood, simply equal life. For those who participated in sacrifice the blood, the life of the animal, was what was required. The fact that the animal died as a result was unfortunate but necessary. This giving of life so that others could have life is still how we talk about many deaths. Every Anzac day we hear how those who died gave their lives that we might live. Giving of life so others may have life.

7

As well as body and blood meaning life it also means the way we express ourselves. We have no other means of self-expression than through our bodies. Our bodies are what we use to communicate our deepest thoughts and emotions. Body and blood stands for the whole person.

It is worth considering how we treat bodies, both those alive and those who have died. One of the first questions asked when our soldiers are killed overseas is “When will their bodies be returned to New Zealand.” Just this week we have seen bodies of soldiers returned after many years. You see we have great concern for bodies, our flesh and blood, whether they are alive or dead.

8

We have this concern because we know that our bodies are about the entire person. Even a dead body still expresses to us something of the life that has gone from our midst.

How much more does a live body of flesh and blood give to us of another? We all know the experience of receiving the care to our bodies when we are ill. We know the life giving result of a hug from one we love. We know too how words

of comfort can reassure us. Our bodies are being used continually to bring life to one another.

9

Flesh and blood is not foreign to us. It is what we use every day, appropriately and inappropriately; with success and with failure, to try and convey our thoughts and wishes to each other. We have nothing else to use but our own flesh and blood to convey life to one another.

Flesh and blood is about life, and it is sacred. It seems that Jesus had to go to the extreme of saying eat my flesh and drink my blood, in order to get people to understand what it meant to

have life in him. And when some of the people began to go away, he asked the disciples, "Do you want to go away too?" Simon Peter said, "you have the message of eternal life." This eternal life is not just about what happens when we die. It's about a quality of life we can live now. It's about living with hope because we know that death cannot destroy us.

10

Eternal life is about knowing that when life deals us some things which are unpleasant that this is not all there is to life. Eternal life is about holding fast to life's meaning, even when that meaning is hidden from us by life's events. The words of eternal life are words which we have to make flesh.

Our words about God, words about each other, words about our faith, are words which we learn to live in action in the midst of all the things,

good and bad, that life throws at us. We too are to be a living word. Using our own flesh and blood to convey the body of Christ to others.

11

In our life together as a faith community today's gospel invites us to consider the way we use our words. Are they words of eternal life. Does what we say and what we do show that we believe in eternal life. Do we live as people of hope, knowing our true destiny as God's people, and being able to act as though we are. Living the gospel, making it flesh, being bread and wine, body and blood for the world. In this Eucharist

we give thanks for the life of Christ given to us in bread and wine. And being filled with his life so we try to live each day our own Christ like life.

Jesus said, Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.