

Sermon for Trinity 13: 25.08.24 (John 6.56-69)

Some 16 years ago, I attended theological training for two years, at Westcott House, which was part of the Cambridge Theological Federation. The Federation consisted of not only the two Anglican colleges (Westcott and Ridley), but also other denominations, such as: The Methodists who were housed at Wesley House, the United Reformers at Westminster College, the Roman Catholics lay ministers at Lady Beaufort; and lastly the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies. The beauty of this, is that we all attended the same lectures, often leading to great discussions and debates, and even some arguments. The Cambridge Theological Federation was a “foretaste” of what one might expect in ministry, working together with other traditions and faiths, all for the common good. I recall one lecture where the speaker was a great noted theologian, whose books filled the many Cambridge book shops, and many a student’s bedsit floor. This particular lecture was supposed to be an introduction to Christian Doctrine, but it quickly turned out, that the great theologian introduced the subject, at a much higher level. Because of this, it left a lot of us in the group, scratching our heads, and even asking him to stop! I didn’t have a clue what was being said, and reminded myself not to buy any of his books! Thankfully it was a one-off lecture.

This morning’s Gospel isn’t quite like that and Jesus wasn’t talking at a higher level, Though no doubt, there were some who found their heads spinning after the long discussion in the Capernaum synagogue. It was more of what he had said, that made a huge impact in their world-view of things. Several of Jesus’ followers upon hearing, grumbled as they grappled with Jesus’ teaching, echoing the theme of the Israelites grumbling in the wilderness, even though God was feeding them with the manna, to sustain and nurture them.

But his new teaching was “difficult” in the sense, that it was demanding, not just to get your head round it, but to put your heart and soul into it too. All of what Jesus had said, was demanding in every sense of the word. Particularly if the hearers might have been prepared to follow a prophet like Moses, or a would-be Messiah, and had pre-conceptions on the conditions which kept such figures within the bounds of the agendas and aspirations they had in mind. The thought of someone who would speak as Jesus had spoken, was too much for some. So, a division among Jesus’ followers, began to grow. It looks as though the majority refused to go with Jesus any longer, with only the twelve and a few others, continuing to be at Jesus’ side. However, we see much later in the Gospel, when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, that there is a large crowd with him, and though many who did not completely understand his teachings; were stirred in some way, to continue to follow Jesus, as well as new followers, eager to hear the Good News. But some of Jesus’ followers would have been “repelled” by the striking language which he uses, especially about eating his flesh, and drinking his blood. It is even a historical fact, that in the Church’s early years, Christians were persecuted vigorously by the Roman Empire for a number of misunderstandings, and in justifying these persecutions, the Romans made all sorts of charges against the early church. We learn from the second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr, that the three main accusations levied against Christians were atheism, incest, and cannibalism. The charge of atheism came from their refusal to worship the Roman pantheon of “gods”. Secondly the charge of incest, originated from the Christian concept of being united as “one family in Christ”, where even husbands and wives, would refer to each other as “brothers and sisters.” The third charge, that of cannibalism, derives from the Christian belief of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The belief they actually ate the flesh of Christ and drank his blood. Those who overheard Christians talking about consuming the flesh and blood of Christ, would have been

incredibly easy to misinterpret the act as cannibalism. This area of contention surrounding “the body and blood of Christ” remains even to this day, and often one of the causes of divisions among Christians: As to whether the “body and blood” of Christ is a memorial of the Last Supper, or literally the body and blood of Christ, or that the elements hold the spiritual presence of Christ. All of the above, are the distinctive features of the Holy Communion, set across the wider Christian community . Even the writings and Gospels of Jesus disciples, came under the scrutiny of some observers, as to whether they are simply a historical record of things which Jesus said, and did. While others are prepared to open their hearts and minds to the teachings from the Son of God; and in doing so, be challenged and enlighten by the message which is being proclaimed. But what really matters, is the spiritual truth which is being taught. This whole discourse that Jesus is teaching in this part of the Gospel, is about the Word becoming flesh. Not the Word becoming an idea, or a feeling or just an experience, though all of these can present themselves to the hearer of the Good News. But becomes embodied in the person who receives the Word of God.

John the writer of this gospel is stating that the actual story of Jesus matters, and that the explanation of how the life, death, resurrection and ascension, interlocks to reveal the whole picture of who Jesus really is. The explanation which Jesus gives, are the keys to unlock this puzzle. The mention of the ascension of the son of man is designed to say: That you need to come to terms with the fact, that the one you are now dealing with, is equally at home in heaven and on earth. Jesus is a citizen of both. He is, after all, the Word made flesh, and if that is so, it makes sense to suppose that this flesh and the blood are somehow vehicles of the inner life of the Word. The flesh by itself, would be irrelevant. But when the flesh is in presence of the Word, who is God – makes sense the way Jesus speaks. Jesus is underlining that his body, and not just his spiritual life, is the place where

the Word took up permanent residence. Here, Jesus is simply warning his followers against a purely physical interpretation of his words, about simply eating and drinking. Jesus is urging his followers, to go beyond a one-dimensional understanding of what he is doing and saying. To break through, is to listen to the Word held within him. His followers will need the Holy Spirit to help them, to fully understand who Jesus is and the new way of life, in which he brings. The Twelve, however, remain ever close to Jesus. They are prepared to proclaim that Jesus is God's Son, and the true Messiah. He is the One who is not only speaking about God's new age, the age yet to come, but bringing it into existence, in the here and now. Jesus knows that one of them will turn traitor and will help hand him over to the authorities. But the Twelve who stand as representatives of the new teachings and new life in Christ, is the belief which Jesus has been looking for in his disciples. In turn, in recognition of him, together with the miracles and wonders, reveals that the heavenly Father, was at last bringing into being, the great movement that would set the whole world free from itself.

Just like the chosen Twelve, we too are called as Jesus followers in this modern age. We not only recognise that Jesus is the Son of God, but through his body and blood; We are not only transformed in the light of Christ, but in turn, bring light and life to others to whomever we meet. When we gather together as the many members of the body of Christ. We are brought into a deep union with him, so that we share his life, in the presence of God. Only by embracing his message, consuming his words in the most profound sense in

prayer, and encountering him in the mystery in the breaking of the bread, can we have true life in ourselves. When we come forward to receive Jesus, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, we will not only offer ourselves for service to God, but be sustained and nurtured too. Because we have come to believe and know, that the words of gospel writer



and disciple John reside in our hearts: “That now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this, we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” The Son of God will always remain with us, and offer each one of us, not only the strength and guidance, but glimmers of hope, which we in turn, can offer to a broken world. **Amen.**