

## John 6:56-69

*'Whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven...the one who eats this bread will live forever'* – In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the things that our four candidates for confirmation will be thinking about in the coming weeks is receiving holy communion for the first time. The PCC of this church has also agreed to introduce the practice of first communions for children, something that takes place in other churches in a tradition similar to ours, with the children having gone through a course of instruction. Holy Communion, the Eucharist, is at the heart of our shared faith and Jesus shows us how in today's gospel.

*'Whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven...the one who eats this bread will live forever'* he says.

Our readings over the last few weeks (bread-tide!) from the sixth chapter of John's gospel have described the life changing reality of the bread that Jesus offers. Jesus repeatedly describing himself as the *'living bread that came down from heaven, the bread of life, not like the bread which his disciples' ancestors ate but true and living bread which gives eternal life'*. This is not about bread as bread but rather bread as sign, bread even as God. Bread of heaven, which by song, we ask to be fed *'for evermore'* in our final hymn.

Our gospel passage is part of what is widely known as John's Eucharistic discourse since it's the clearest reference John's gospel makes to the ritual practice of the Eucharist. In the Matthew, Mark and Luke we have that ritual identified with Jesus' death. *'On the night he was betrayed Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'*. The act of the Last Supper before which Jesus is handed over to the authorities.

For John however the emphasis is slightly different as he ties the ritual not to Jesus' death but to his life. For John, the Eucharist is very clearly the gift of life, the message here is life affirming – *'Whoever eats me will live because of me'*. Jesus saves life by giving life, and the language of his flesh as the *'bread of life'* emphasises embodiment – it is in Jesus that we find our true sustenance. And he tells them that the words that he has offered here are *'Spirit and Life'*. Flesh and spirit belong together and only by their union is eternal life possible.

Now this was difficult for Jesus' audience at the time; such language of eating flesh is hard for the disciples to accept. Some of them up and leave. To the Jews of Jesus' day, it was unthinkable to drink

animal blood, and capital crime according to their law. How much more scandalous then to drink the blood and eat the flesh of a human being (first Christians seen as cannibals).

But the language here is to help us understand that in the mystery of the incarnation, flesh and spirit are brought together. And this teaching remains difficult for us today. How often do we hear of references to 'the spiritual' in contemporary culture, as if there is a realm above and beyond, cut off from that which we can engage and grasp. *'I'm spiritual but not religious'* goes the saying for so many.

Christianity is not a 'spiritual' faith in that category. The challenge John offers through this discourse is to treat the world around us as incarnational and not simply material. To see how God has infused the world and all of creation with the Spirit, for which the bread of the Eucharist is the perfect sign.

Keeping the flesh together with the spirit requires us to live deeply, appreciating our interdependence and interconnectedness with the Creator, with all of creation and with our fellow creatures. By inviting us to eat and drink of his whole person, Jesus challenges us to risk living incarnationally becoming whole in both flesh and spirit. This is what it means to abide in Jesus as he asks us to do. As Jesus is the incarnation of God, so we are invited to be part of that divine body, to be the incarnation of Christ in the world.

After receiving communion this morning we will pray – thanking God for feeding us with the body and blood of his Son. We pray that through Christ we might offer our souls and bodies to be living sacrifices. That we might be sent out in the power of the spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory. These are not statements of self-satisfaction or privilege but a prayer to see the world in a new light, to seeing human beings with new eyes, to working as best we can to bring God's purposes nearer to fruition in the world. To take seriously what we are about to receive in the Eucharist is to take seriously the whole material order of creation – it's why our material bodies matter and what we do with them and how we treat them. It's why all of creation matters and how we care for it. In its centrality to Christian devotion, the Eucharist overflows into the rest of our life, giving us the energy and vision for thanksgiving in all things, for making the connection between flesh and spirit in everything we experience.

Let us pray then that God might accept us as we dedicate ourselves to him and that, by feeding on Christ by faith, we and those to be confirmed here in October might be strengthened by his Holy Spirit now and for ever. Amen.