

**Pentecost 11**  
**20/08/2006**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14**  
**Psalm 111**  
**Ephesians 5:15-20**  
**John 6:51-58**

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**The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh/body**

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The Bread of Life discourses in John's Gospel are not overtly about the Eucharist, but they are usually treated as such. To live from an imagination that is grounded in the Eucharist is to live with the Bread and Wine as symbols that draw us ever more deeply into the discovery of insights about life. We are not concerned with ordinary bread - sustenance and money. We are focussed on something else that John calls the Heavenly Bread: a God given reality, which satisfies human hunger and thirst at a much deeper level. We are not talking about food or drink in any sense that we know of it - and yet this talk is inextricably linked to bread and wine and the meal that we share.

Today's reading is controversial. Jesus insists that he has come from God the Life Giver and is filled with his life. There is no life for his disciples unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood. This sounds like cannibalism and the crowd ask: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The idea is repugnant to them, and the idea is no easier for us to deal with. But Jesus insists they will not be raised up unless they digest the life that is in him. Of course this is not a statement to be taken literally in so far as eating is concerned. But it forcefully puts the case for how the life of God is linked to our life through the self-giving of Jesus.

In John Jesus and the disciples do not celebrate the Last Supper of the Passover. However John's timing of the Passion suggests that Jesus died at the hour of the Passover sacrifice. This creates a link between the Bread of life discourses, the Passover, and the bread in the wilderness, but there is also some way in which it is suggested that these forms are now surpassed. The Manna, which perishes is surpassed by Jesus' body: that has come down from heaven. It is this that will be broken, poured out and lifted up for the life of the world. This "bread" is not bread at all. But it comes to us from the self-giving of God and is for our life and sustenance.

Everything that the Cross stands for is signified here. In speaking of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, Jesus is saying that unless people receive him and live in the light of the self-offering that led to his death, they cannot find their way to the life that he gives. Our entry into "life" is bound up with being willing to assimilate what he gave through his death, because this discloses who God is for us.

The challenge Jesus offers to his audience is about participating in the life he offers. This means to trust God in the same way as he did, and live according to the pattern of the Cross. The idea of eating and drinking is a graphic way of saying this is not some ethereal reality, or some abstract philosophical truth. It is meant to be a reciprocal relationship between Jesus and his followers. Eating and drinking nourish us physically. The reciprocity of relationship between Christ and us will nourish us as a

body of his members. The idea here is not very different from the notion of abiding - mutual indwelling - used elsewhere in John.

Any relationship we have is based on who we are as bodily selves. It is as flesh and blood that we are present to one another in life. And we know that a collection of bodies can be regarded as a body. Every Sunday we acknowledge one another with the words: *We are the body of Christ/ His Spirit is with us*. Immediately we go on to share the supper in which he gave the disciples bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood. This is claiming a relationship - one in which we are fed by who he is and what he is for us: the one who brings us together and gives us life.

This week we had the first of the sessions led by Prism Studios aimed to help us think through possible changes to the Sanctuary. It has been very powerful to see that the first and most telling symbol is the gathered congregation, meeting around the Christian symbols: water, light, word, bread, wine, cross and oil. What we have been thinking about is going to cause us to read this building, and the way we assemble in it, in new ways. It speaks, and the way we gather here speaks too. The time spent yesterday reminded me of a group of school children who visited this church and I had to explain to them the symbolism of this space. I asked them to look at it and tell me what seems to be important to us. The first thing named was the people, gathered around, and the second thing they mentioned was the Cross. The Table came in third and then the pulpit. I wonder what we would have said if asked the same question?

We are a people, gathered before the symbol of God's self-giving, the Cross, which, being empty, is also the sign of Christ in his risen life. Before us is the table where we remember Christ, and seek to be fed by him again in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. The Cross is hidden in these signs, because no bread can be baked without the grinding of wheat and no wine can be made without the crushing of grapes. Cross, bread and wine are all transformed symbols. And, just as we digest the food, we seek to listen to Christ's voice in the word of the Gospel and the preaching. The listening and the feeding are consequences of our gathering here: they are means by which we assimilate Christ. But nothing would be possible without the self-giving of God. It is that self-giving, and the promise that it brings, that changes this space. It is not just another building. By the power and promise of God this is a piece of heaven on earth. A place where people receive the life that does not end. That makes it a very special place indeed, and it is good to be investing in thinking more deeply on whose we are, and how we will seek to shape our sanctuary. Because the more clearly our sanctuary allows us to feed on Christ, the more powerfully will we be shaped for our part in God's mission in the world.