

Sunday 12 Year B (Eucharist) Holy Redeemer 11 AM

I've been on silent retreat for a week at St. Beuno's, the Jesuit retreat centre in north Wales, so I've had lots of time to pray and think about today's readings which I did, and I had about half a sermon prepared, but something (someone?) kept telling me to speak more about the eucharist. Two weeks ago on the feast of Corpus Christi I offered some reflections and I would like to continue with that today. We use the expression rather too easily, but the Eucharist really is the "gift which keeps on giving".

The fullest, clearest and most profound teaching on the eucharist in the Bible is in John ch. 6. At the end of the chapter, some of the disciples on hearing it say:

This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?'

Many of them just walk away and stop following him. Let's take a closer look at why what Jesus said was so intolerable.

In verse 51 Jesus basically lays out his stall and sums up the Eucharist in one sentence:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

His hearers respond by arguing and saying:

How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

In other words: "Is he suggesting that we become cannibals?" Their response exactly mirrors that of the rather dull-witted Nicodemus who, when told he must be born again, asks how someone can get back into their mother's womb. (See John 3:4)

It's important to see how Jesus deals with these misunderstandings. In the case of Nicodemus, he makes it clear that of he doesn't mean that. He says basically: "don't be so silly Nicodemus, I mean that you have to be born again of water and spirit, not literally." But in this case, Jesus does nothing to clear up the misunderstanding. We might expect him here to say something like: "Don't be silly, I don't mean that you have to eat me, I mean you must receive me spiritually." Then everyone could breathe a sigh of relief. But no, he does the opposite; he makes the statement even harder even more explicit.

The ordinary Greek word for 'eat' is *esthiō* and it's used six times in these verses about the Eucharist. But in verse 54, where Jesus really drives home the enormity of what he is saying, he continues:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. 56 He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (John 6:51, 53-56)

The word he uses here for ‘eats’ is not the ordinary one, *esthiō* but the verb *trōgō* which means to chew, or munch or devour. (This important difference does not come out in any of the translations.) In order to deal with a crowd who are scandalized by the suggestion of eating Jesus, he says something like: “And when I say eat me, I mean eat me, devour me.” When they go off unable to accept this, he doesn’t call them back and tell them that they have got it all wrong; he lets them go. If Jesus were speaking metaphorically and people went away because they had (wrongly) understood him literally, surely he would have cleared up that misunderstanding. But in fact the crowd have understood him correctly (however dimly and partially) and if they can’t take that, then Jesus just lets them go.

So Jesus (and John) invites his followers to put their money where their mouth is. If you say you believe in Jesus you will take part in the Eucharist which the community celebrates, and if you don’t then it is hard to see how you are real follower of Jesus in any way that means anything. Without participation in the Eucharist, without going to Mass and being fed on the bread of life, one’s Christianity is merely theoretical.

The second thing that Jesus says his followers must do is even more offensive; they must drink his blood. Probably the one thing everyone knows about Kosher food is that it is drained of blood. For an orthodox Jew, drinking blood is the most awful abomination.

If Jesus is trying to ‘win friends and influence people’ he’s shooting himself in the foot. If modern people find the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist strange or repellent, that’s nothing new. One can scarcely think of anything more calculated to repel a Jewish audience than what he said here. If Jesus deliberately wanted to drive people away, he could scarcely have chosen better words. Why then did he say this? Because he meant it. If he meant something else, then John chapter six is one of the worst public relations blunders in history.

The crowd cannot take this, neither the teaching on the Eucharist, and they go away. Jesus does not call them back. He is quite prepared to let them go if they can’t take what he has said and will not water it down for the sake of popularity. The language here seems almost calculated to turn off non-Christians. If belief in the Eucharist is a scandal to ‘modern rational’ people today maybe it’s doing its job.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul spends two whole chapters, 10 & 11, discussing the implications of the eucharist. He gives an account of its institution at the Last Supper very similar to the words of consecration at every Mass. We hear this several times in the readings in the course of the year. Then he goes on to say something which is rather, well frightening. I did some work on this several years ago and thought to myself that the next time this appears in the Sunday readings I must preach on it. To my horror I discovered that in the present rite it does not appear at all, so even if you had been to Mass in the Novus

Ordo every day for the last 51 years you will not have heard this read at Mass. So, guess what, I'm going to read it to you now. This hasn't been heard in this Church since 1969.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

Is Paul being superstitious here? Have people died because of careless communions? I've seen plenty of them in my time, but I've never heard of anyone dying because they took the sacrament with the wrong attitude. Probably he's using this expression metaphorically. Because people take communion with the wrong disposition they become spiritually weak, even spiritually dead. This is a real possibility today. In other words, treating the things of God carelessly is always disastrous. Many older translations render the Greek more literally.

Therefore are there many infirm and weak among you, and many sleep.
(DRA)

Sleep is often a metaphor for death, so likely Paul is telling his audience that some are spiritually asleep. At all events it becomes clear that playing games or being dishonest with God has dire consequences. If people take communion carelessly it makes them worse Christians, not better. To receive the Eucharist without real appreciation, preparation and thanksgiving is to take God's greatest gift for granted. That's why the Church has developed various things like the Eucharistic fast to make sure people don't do that. Also the insistence that if someone has committed a mortal sin they must confess before receiving the Eucharist again, they must formally make their peace with God. Many people today receive without paying the slightest attention to the state of their souls and they are doing spiritual damage to themselves. And let's face it, many communions are rather careless. I don't know how many times I've had to go after people who were walking away with the host in their hands. I've often asked such people: "are you a Catholic?" Sometimes they get visibly offended, but some Catholics receive communion and show no sign whatsoever that they know or appreciate what or should I say who they are receiving. I don't think anyone has ever done this with any malicious purpose, I don't think anyone ever wants to desecrate the host, but people sometimes get very careless about the way they receive God's greatest gift to us. If you walk off with the eucharist in your hand intending to consume it somewhere on the way back to your bench, then you are treating it as though it were no more than an ice cream or a bag of crisps. We never eat fine food on the move. Well you cannot get finer dining than the Eucharist. I personally think

communion in the hand, standing, has been absolutely disastrous for our faith in the Eucharist, but I don't have the power to change that. So when you take communion, put out both hands flat, receive the body of Christ with reverence, step to one side and consume it there in front of the altar, and then return to your seat and make your thanksgiving. Never, ever just take it from the hands of the priest or minister.

Saint Paul's sense is that each Mass is such a close encounter with the living Jesus that it's like a mini last judgment. Imagine how we will meet the Lord on Judgment day; well we have to be in that frame of mind every time we receive, or as we say, in a state of grace. The Eucharist presupposes that we have a real desire for union with Christ and that we are at least taking some of the steps, according to our own ability, to make that union real. If that isn't the case then the person who receives is acting out a close union with Christ that doesn't really exist and they have no intention of bringing into existence. Sadly too many people treat the Eucharist as a right on not a great privilege. The Eucharist can prove toxic because a person without the right frame of mind can become self-righteous and not open to conversion, whereas it is designed to produce repentance, a contrite, humble, grateful heart. So the way we receive communion is very important. So let's make sure we treat this greatest of sacraments with the greatest of love and reverence, and let me give the last word to St. Thomas Aquinas, in the antiphon for the vespers, of Corpus Christi *O Sacrum Convivium*.

O sacred banquet!
in which Christ is received,
the memory of his Passion is renewed,
the mind is filled with grace,
and a pledge of future glory is given to us.
Alleluia.