

18th August 2024, Trinity 12 – Revd Dorienke de Vries
Anglican Church Arnhem and Nijmegen

Readings: 1 Kings 2.1-12, 3.3-14; Ps 111; Eph 5.15-20; John 6.51-58
Hymns 514, 39, 531, 56

Other than I expected, it was really complicated to choose the hymns for this Sunday. That may sound strange. The gospel reading is the core text about Jesus being the bread of life. Our hymnbook has lots of hymns about Jesus being the bread of life. But when I went through the lyrics, it struck me that they all explicitly focus on the Eucharist. They seemed to be more inspired by that other core text about Jesus as the bread of life: the institution of the Eucharist just before the crucifixion. And so they are all about preparing for communion, for the moment when we receive the literal bread and wine in remembrance of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

But in today's reading, Jesus is not talking about the Eucharist. His audience are not handed literal bread and wine as a symbol or token of his body and blood. This is a very graphic sermon indeed. It paints a picture of human flesh and blood being devoured by human beings. We may have become so used to the symbolic language, that we no longer find it disgusting. But the first Jewish listeners certainly did. The cannibalistic image causes a major break-up between Jesus and many of the people who had been following him until then. In verse 60, just after this sermon, we are told that many of his disciples are saying, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' They turn back and leave him. And that causes Jesus real and deep sadness.

So why did Jesus choose this image? If he had worded his message differently, he might not have lost as many followers as he did now. Apparently this is so important that he cannot compromise on the wording. This time it is not enough to say 'follow me' or 'believe in me'; no – we have to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

Food and drink are of course the basics of life. We all need it to sustain us, to keep us going. We need it regularly and we need it to be healthy. And if we want it to do us any good, it is not enough to just prepare it, it is not enough to just put it on display, we have to eat and drink and digest it. We have to tuck in, we have to chew, we have to swallow, our stomachs and bowels have to do their job. Food and drink have to become part of our body, it is where our bodies get their energy from, it is the way our bodies are enabled to renew their cells and to go on living. A body that is denied food and drink will wither and die.

Now our bodies are more than just material things. They are created to be temples of God. And so to keep us going as temples of the living God, we need more than just material food; we need spiritual food as well. Just as our bodies cannot do without physical food and drink, so our souls cannot live without God feeding us with his life and love.

'I live because of the Father,' says Jesus. In a way that goes for all of us, as I said. It is true in a physical and in a spiritual sense. Without God there would be no life at all. But in Jesus the life of the Father is fully present. In him the life of the Father has come among us in all its fullness. If we also want to be filled with God, Jesus is the one to turn to – not just the one to hand out the living bread, but the living bread itself. We are invited to feed on him – on his life, his teachings, the mystery of his passion and resurrection. It is only by taking in and digesting the spiritual food that he offers us, that our lives can be saved – or healed. God wants more than just our bodily, biological existence. He wants to become part of us, to be one with us. He wants to fill us, and to renew us, and to do so for ever and ever and ever, so we will never die.

If we want this life, it is not enough to just listen to the words. It is not enough to write a nice sermon about them. It is not even enough to just take communion every week. We all have to eat and drink and digest what is being offered in a spiritual way. We have to know this spiritual hunger and thirst that make us eat and drink it regularly – in reading our bibles, in prayer, in singing hymns and psalms, in contemplation and in silent meditation. We have to long for God as a deer pants for the water brooks.

Somebody who knew this hunger was King Solomon. He could have asked for anything to fulfill all his earthly desires: money and wealth, power and prestige – but he chose to pray for wisdom, which is the in-dwelling presence of the Spirit of God in his heart. Only when filled by God himself he felt he would be able to lead the people of God in the ways of God, so they would know God as well and fear him, and in doing so be blessed. In his prayer for wisdom we see this deep hunger for what really matters.

Psalm 111 confirms this attitude: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When we begin to know and love the Lord, when we acknowledge the right he has to our life, we start praying for wisdom: for more understanding, more insight, more love and obedience. Without this hunger there would be no prayer, without this thirst, we would never seek his face, without this craving for God himself, we would never search for the truth.

And of course, this has everything to do with the Eucharist. In its teaching on the sacraments, the Anglican Church tells us that the sacraments are an outward, visible sign of an inward invisible grace. It is that inward invisible grace that we have been speaking of so far: this persistent hunger and thirst for God's grace, this deep longing to have his life within us, this fear of the Lord, prompting us to seek wisdom and to discern his will.

May we always know this longing. May we always know this hunger and thirst for a life that radiates the life and love of God. Because only then we will be satisfied by the simple tokens of bread and wine that we receive Sunday after Sunday in this simple ritual.

So draw near with faith. Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you, and his blood which he shed for you. Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you and feed on him in your hearts.

By faith.

With thanksgiving.

Every day of your life.

Amen.