



Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 15 August 2021

READINGS

1 Kings 2: 10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5: 15-20; John 6: 51-58

The Bread of Life

There is an African-American spiritual, "Give me Jesus." The singer asks to be given Jesus at all times: in the morning, at darkest midnight, break of day, at death, and in song. The words of the chorus are "Give me Jesus, give me Jesus, you can have all the rest, give me Jesus." This beautiful spiritual captures what it means to eat and drink the true food that is Jesus. This also reminded me of my teenage years and our involvement in the youth as we led services and took part in funeral vigils where you would often hear choruses that expressed this same theology: "I care not for my body, I care not for my bones – all I care about is my soul" another way of saying "give me Jesus". It is interesting, as I later came to reflect on these spirituals that they were often sung at funerals, thus placing Christ at the centre of life – that even in the midst of death, the living were to be reminded of their need for Christ in their lives.

Here in the Gospel of John, we find the same kind of theology which places Jesus in the middle of this argument with the crowds following him: about bread from heaven and Jesus' confusing words "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." You can imagine the stunned looks: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" What does this talk of flesh and blood and heavenly bread and even with the Lord's Supper really have to do with the ins and outs, the ups and downs, of everyday living? What does it have to do with us, here and now, two thousand years later, struggling just to make ends meet?" Or, in other words, "Stop talking nonsense, Jesus. We need something a little better than your empty, abstract, metaphorical promises."

And to this, Jesus responds by insisting on the point he has already made. "I am telling you the truth," he says, both to the crowd gathered around him in Capernaum and those gathered in our congregations. "I am telling you the truth: if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in yourselves. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.... For my flesh is the real food; my blood is the real drink." I imagine that if there were children around they'd have gone: "Ew, gross" Because the crowds thought Jesus was being literal!

The seemingly gruesome text from the Gospel of John needs to be understood in its cultural context. What Jesus is speaking about has always been regarded as an abomination by the law and the prophets, Eating the blood of an animal is prohibited in Judaism. This is because it represents the God-given life of the animal. More than that, however, there was the belief that if the worshipper ate the blood of the animal along with the flesh, the worshipper would take on the characteristics of the animal. Hence, it was

prohibited. It seems that, by inviting His followers spiritually to eat His flesh and drink His blood, Jesus wanted them to take on His characteristics: to live the self-giving life.

For three weeks, now, we have looked at this sixth chapter of The Gospel According to John and have connected it to our faith and, particularly, to the sacraments and the way they create and nourish our faith. But now, here, in the fourth week, we finally encounter the heart of it all. In these verses we begin to recognize just what is at stake for Jesus, just how much we are worth to him. In these verses, he offers to us his very own flesh and blood, the flesh which will be stretched upon the cross for our sake, the blood which will flow freely from his hands, feet, and side, also for our sake. For three weeks we have read, studied, and struggled to understand what Jesus means by speaking of the bread of life and the food from heaven. Here, now, in this fourth week Jesus offers us the God who becomes incarnate, who takes on flesh, becomes just like us, so that we may one day be like God.

For in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and in the sacraments, the Word given physical, visible form once again, we meet the God who will be satisfied with nothing less than our whole selves. This is why Jesus speaks of giving us his flesh and blood, you see, for "flesh and blood" is a Hebrew idiom which refers to the whole person, hearts, minds, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything. In Jesus, you see, the whole of God meets us to love, redeem, and sustain the whole of who we are, good and bad.

The God who comes for our whole selves. In one sense, this sums up all of John's testimony to Christ. For throughout the Fourth Gospel we have encountered some of the most familiar images describing the relationship of Jesus and those who believe in him: Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep; he is the vine and we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in him. "In this passage, For those who receive Jesus, the whole Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. This is the promise which God makes to us in the Sacraments: to be one with us and for us forever, to stick with us and even in us no matter what. That is a great promise!

Each and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, God comes to us once again to offer us a promise that in these common physical elements, we encounter a God who not only cares about our births and deaths, our marriages and our jobs, our successes and our failures, but that God has also meets us exactly where we are.

These passages of scripture have serious economic implications. In the Old Testament, Solomon recognises that the understanding of wisdom goes beyond wealth and seeks the health of the whole community. What it means is that if some members of the community go hungry and lack the basics, the community is at risk. We have seen this demonstrated - at least in part - in the looting and pillaging that took place in our country a few weeks ago. While Jesus' words point to the sacrament of Holy Communion, however, we also recognise that the bread of life that Jesus talks about, is not only spiritual but most importantly, also physical. We share in God's bread so that we can provide whole-person nourishment for those for those around us - especially the poor and unemployed among us.

In East Africa alone, thousands of children are at risk of starvation as the food crisis affect about 32,9 million people. Worldwide, about 340 million children younger than 5 don't get the nutrition they need. Hunger affects everything from intellectual development to physical development and the ability to fight off illness.

In our Gospel, Jesus uses the metaphorical language of “eating his flesh and blood” so that God may be in us as we are in God. Our dependence on God imply that we become interdependent on one another, in our joys and in our struggles.

This has been made clearer by the words of Brene Brown:

“My mom taught us to never look away from people’s pain.

The lesson was simple:

Don’t look away.

Don’t pretend not to see hurt.

Look people in the eye.

Even when their pain is overwhelming.

And when you’re in pain,

find the people who can look you in the eye.

We need to know we’re not alone - especially when we’re hurting.

This lesson is one of the greatest gifts of my life.”

- Brene Brown

May we be enabled to see those in pain and suffering and struggle so that we too can contribute to Jesus’ wish for all to be fed at the table of the Lord to fill both our spiritual and physical hunger. Surely, as in that broken bread and that shared cup, it is the same Christ we are trying to recognise in the brokenness of our lives?

Amen.