

“Be Nourished” – John 6:51-58 – Aug 19/12

“Cannibals! That’s what they are ... cannibals! I say let’s kill them all off this very night!” We can easily imagine a group of men sitting around a table, somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, 101AD, in the late afternoon sun, making exactly this statement over a cup of house red wine. Or change the scene to an East London accent: “Cannibals! oi’ve ‘eard they not only eat flesh and drink blood, they butcher babies!” “No!” “Yes, for a fact! Those weird people, they call themselves ‘The Way’, they meet down at Lydia’s house every week! Singing, carrying on, then it gets all quiet and you just know they’re up to no good with that flesh and blood stuff. Someone should report them to the authorities, and that’s a fact!”

Life was tough in the early church, and it was made tougher as word was whispered from house to house, from tavern to tavern that their practices included cannibalism. And who could blame the good townsfolk? All that talk about “eating his flesh” and “drinking his blood”, together with secret symbols and greetings, and clandestine meetings in houses.

Mind you, it was a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation because the church was driven underground by persecution from both the state and the established religions of the day, yet at the same time the very underground practices that were necessary for the survival of both the early church and the early church-goers, those secret practices were used against the church as evidence of their nefarious nature.

But of all the practices the early church observed, Communion had to be among the least understood and most offensive to those outside the church. ‘Eat my flesh.’ ‘Drink my blood.’ The very injunctions given to the church by Jesus as he sat at table with his disciples became at the same time both the most important part of life within the church and the most dangerous of practices seen from outside the church. People are quick to fear others whom they don’t understand, and just as quick to demonize those whom they fear, and probably the most common and strongest example of such demonizing is the claim of cannibalism, especially the claim that “those people eat their babies”. And such were the claims made against those who practiced their faith in the early Christian church.

So strong was the need for those early Christians to defend themselves against these charges that the understanding of just what Jesus had instructed them about this practice of “eat my flesh, drink my blood” was hammered out fully on the anvils of theology, and documented in great and even tedious detail. The greatest example of such full treatment of the understanding and explanation of just what Jesus meant is this portion of John’s gospel. The treatment of Jesus’ claim “I am the bread of life” is so complete in John Chapter 6 that the lectionary spans five consecutive Sundays on the one topic. Five weeks is indeed a long series on a single topic (which is why I chose to preach on the series on King David instead!) but it was extremely necessary for John to elaborate in great detail what Jesus meant with his command “eat my flesh, drink my blood” in order to help the church fend off attacks from huge misunderstandings.

But it was not only people outside the church who misunderstood. We see from the instructions to the Ephesians that the people of that congregation were overdoing the “eat and drink” injunctions, apparently figuring that if a little wine is a good thing, then a lot of wine is a great thing! Just as some people outside the church quickly moved to an excess of criticism, it seems that some people inside the church moved fairly quickly to an excess of gluttony – gorging and imbibing. We give thanks for those who persevered, who were able to explain and proclaim the meaning of Christ’s words to the faithful both inside the church, and to those who would become the faithful from outside the church.

You would think that we, both inside and outside the church, would have learned something over the past two thousand years, but it seems like that's not necessarily the case. The church, having moved along an arc from clandestine meetings in the beginning, through being not only the official religion of the state but in many cases the state itself, and back down to hardly being noticed, has over the span of two millennia continued to both misunderstand the commands of our Lord from within and to be misunderstood from without as it struggles in adherence to those commands. At the peak of its power, when the church lumbered through the Middle Ages with obsessive and oppressive exercise of misbegotten practices, the church misunderstood the role modeled by Christ. In more recent times the outside world has turned its back on the church, repelled by a misunderstood obsession within the church on status and rule-based ethics. It's no wonder in many ways that the church is still seen by those outside as "those strange people with their weird practices", not so different from the charges of cannibalism made against the early church.

So if Christ was not calling his followers to cannibalism with his injunction to eat heartily at the Last Supper, what then did he mean when he said to them and to others, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you"? While we are sure he didn't mean it literally, it is too easy to write off his command as merely symbolic. I believe Jesus had a deeper, broader, and more significant understanding of what he was asking us to do – and for that matter, to be.

As important and meaningful as our sacramental rituals are, it seems clear in John's gospel that Jesus is calling his followers to something a bit more than a dignified downing of a wafer or cube of bread and the teensiest sip of grape juice, fermented or not. Throughout this whole episode, beginning with the satisfying of the hunger of thousands of people and ending with even many of his disciples turning away from him, Jesus uses language that evokes a powerful sense of action, of participation, of doing. One of the great pities of the Greek mindset that we have inherited is an emphasis on thinking, and on feeling, which separates us in a significant way from the corporeal, body-tingling sense of 'being' experienced by the Jews among whom Jesus moved, and indeed in Jesus himself. We speak of thinking about hunger; the tradition in which Jesus was born and lived spoke of "the pains of the belly". The language Jesus uses to describe his role is of action: of eating, drinking, coming down from heaven, being raised, and most importantly living and dying. These are not philosophical terms; these are not even merely theological terms. These are the very actions of life itself.

Ultimately, the language of action which Jesus used became the very actions he embodied. Born of woman, flesh and blood as we are, dying in perfect obedience, being raised again on the third day. Creating, through his own actions, the very things for which the elements of our Holy Communion became the symbols. And in that creating, calling us to participate fully. "Eat my flesh, drink my blood!", Christ tells us. "Eat heartily of both the symbol of my essence and being and of what that symbol represents." "Throw yourself into becoming one with me", Christ invites, "that you may be filled with the very grace and mercy of God who sent me. Become so enmeshed with me that the life I have to offer is yours."

We are invited not only to be fed but to be nourished – we are called to plunge ourselves into the feast of Christ's abundant life, to live freed of the chains of sin, to proclaim with rejoicing the miracle that God has wrought within us, to call all who hunger to the banquet. Bold images of feasting on God's grace, offering smiles of joyful abandonment in life instead of pinched faces of restrain and denial. This is no dainty tea party to which Christ calls us; we are called to a feast, to a noisy, boisterous banquet filled with life and vibrancy and joy.

Most important of all, this is an open invitation. This is a banquet with enough seats for all who would accept an invitation. There is plenty of grace to go around. This is, as Jesus said, not the manna that spoiled overnight, this is the bread that gives life: life abundant, and life eternal. There is no need for us to huddle at the table, afraid there won't be enough to go around. Quite the opposite it is our responsibility and calling to proclaim to all that supper is served. It's our turn to go out into the streets and to invite strangers to the wedding feast prepared for Christ and his bride, the church.

To our credit here at Central in large measure I believe we already do respond to that call. We do welcome all who come to savour the grace of God at the Lord's Table. Through the breakfast ministry, the bread ministry, the Christmas hampers, the Food Bank we help others to taste and see that the Lord is good. However, as we move forward into and through our redevelopment process and acquire new facilities with which we can reach out to our community, we will need to discover ways to broaden and build upon that foundation of faithful response to Christ's invitation. Are there other possibilities we can explore to translate Communion into Community? I am sure there will be possibilities and opportunities in abundance and that in the finding and living out of all of these possibilities we will continue to reap Christ's promise that in being fed by him and nourished by him we will abide in him, and he in us.