

St Philip and St James Anglican Church
Palma de Mallorca Spain
15th August 2021
The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
Theme: Jesus is the Living Bread

Text: John 6: 51-58

Introduction

In the name of God; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen. Again, another week of the bread of life discourse and another one is yet come next week. Chapter 6 is one of the strongest chapters where Jesus is making a strong Christological claim. So, one would understand why liturgists have dedicated four weeks to one chapter. Last week I was speaking to one of my friends who struggled with preaching from the gospel of John, and he said these have been four terrible weeks for him. He ended up taking refuge in two other readings from either the Old Testament or New Testament letters. This time, Jesus is saying I am the “living bread” and this language reminds us of the “living water” that Jesus offered the Samaritan woman at the well after she had refused to give Him some water to drink in Chapter 4:10.

Exegesis of the Text

Just like last week, the lectionary begins by picking up the last verse of the previous week and this time around it is verse 51 that is being picked from last Sunday's text. In verse 51, He says, **"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."** This statement about eating his flesh causes arguments to break out within the crowd and provides the opportunity for Jesus to move this conversation to the next level. In verse 53, He said to them, **"Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."** The crowd begins to express their confusion over how Jesus can give his flesh for them to eat. Listen to their question, **"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"** When the crowd is bothered and confused by Jesus' claim to give his flesh, he makes an even more offensive statement: they will need to eat his flesh and drink his blood (verse 53). "Flesh" is a provocative word, raising the specter of cannibalism. It is especially provocative in a culture that distinguishes so precisely between clean and unclean meat and emphasizes strict kosher laws. The first consideration for any Jew, contemplating the eating of any flesh, would be whether that flesh is permitted or forbidden. No observant Jew would consider eating human flesh. Even among us cannibalism is a taboo.

In the history of the study of John's gospel, verses 51-58 make up one of the most widely and hotly disputed passages. The interpretation of this text is mainly influenced by one's theological orientation; especially if the contestation is between evangelical and catholic preachers or theologians. At the heart of the debate is whether or not these statements refer to the eating and drinking of the Eucharist. The question is further compounded by the absence of Jesus' words regarding his body and blood at the last supper in John. The first significant issue here is whether Jesus' words are Eucharistic (referring to the Lord's Supper) or simply incarnational/sacrificial (referring to the incarnation and the cross). The question is significant. Is Jesus emphasizing participation in the Eucharist here? I would not want to involve myself in this debate lest I am tempted to turn this sermon into a theological discourse. However, my conclusion is that incarnational, sacrificial, and Eucharistic emphases are intertwined in this text.

Application

Whether this text is read sacramentally in terms of the Eucharist or read incarnationally or sacrificially, the important point is that it is Jesus who gives life. The equally crucial assurance conveyed is that this life is not our production but his gift. The Eucharist is life-giving because it draws us deeper into relationship with Jesus. However, there can be no proper understanding of the Eucharist apart from this life-giving participation in the life and the death of Jesus himself. While this part of chapter 6 certainly brings to mind the Eucharist, it is not primarily *about* the Eucharist. It is primarily about Jesus himself as the food of eternal life from the Father. For eternal life does not come through understanding correctly or believing the right things. I may be a professor of theology understanding the correct doctrines and the right things to believe; I may be an expert of biblical exegesis and an excellent expositor of biblical texts, but that is not a guarantee for eternal life. Eternal life is being in close communion with Jesus. Eternal life is to remain in Jesus and to have Jesus remain in us. We take Christ's body and blood into our mouths, into our stomachs, into our bodies, so that Christ remains in us and we remain in Christ. As we eat and drink, Christ moves us closer to himself. Christ moves us closer to the very life of God. Christ moves us closer to himself, so close that we are as intimate with Jesus as the Father is with the Son. Amen.

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