19 August 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Proverbs 9: 1–6, Ephesians 5: 15–20, John 6: 51–58

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I heard that a poll had been done of the three text messages people most like to hear. The first one is, ‘I love you’, the second one is ‘I forgive you’, the third one, oddly, is ‘Dinner is Ready’. It strikes me that these three are a pretty good distillation of the good news of Jesus. This week we will focus on the third of these… ‘dinner is ready’.

Food is a large part of my life. As a mother of 3 boys preparing food, cooking food and clearing up food takes up quite a bit of my time. When they were little there was an inverse correlation between the amount of time spent on a meal to the amount that was eaten. An elaborate meal would be discarded in disgust and pasta and pesto devoured within seconds. Now they are all teenagers it’s all about quantity. They are seemingly ravenous all the time and piles of carbs disappear instantly.

Every meal seems like a feast and is enthusiastically devoured.

The feast is a central theme of scripture.

In our first reading from Proverbs wisdom is described using the metaphor of a woman laying on a feast, slaughtering her animals, and inviting her guests to eat and drink. An act that, we are told, will lead to life. (Proverbs 9:1-6)

The feast is an image used by Jesus over and over again: we think of the wedding banquet where he turned water into wine; the parable of the banquet where the poor and outcast are welcomed; his decision to eat and drink with those considered sinners; and of course his last meal with his disciples where he relates the bread and wine to himself, to his own body and blood.

John’s gospel, oddly, doesn’t have a sharing of bread of wine at the Last Supper. Instead John has the feeding of the 5000 followed by a long discussion about what had just taken place and what that might mean. He speaks of himself as the ‘bread of life’ - and our passage from John 6 comes at the end of this and Jesus uses shockingly direct language:
'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you'. (John 6: 53)

‘my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink’ (John 6:55)

This is shocking language. Eating flesh and drinking blood. Apologies to those of you who are vegetarian or vegan here. It’s akin to cannibalism. And if we find it shocking imagine how the first Century Jewish listeners found it.

For Jews it is vitally important that the flesh of meat must be separated from the blood. This is the central tenet of Kosher butchering. The belief is that blood contains life. (Leviticus 17:10-14)

And Jesus goes even further to make his point. Rather than toning down his language to make it more palatable, he deliberately uses language to shock. The word he uses for ‘eat’ throughout isn’t the common word for eating but is ‘trogo’ which literally means ‘to chew, gnaw or munch’. It’s a word that describes animals devouring a bone. It’s vivid and disturbing stuff:

‘those who munch (trogo) on my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life’. (John 6:54)

What does he mean by this?

Debates have raged throughout Christendom on this matter since Jesus uttered these words. After Jesus had spoken those in the synagogue in Capernaum listening to him cried out: ‘this teaching is difficult, and who can accept it’. (John 6:60)

And it’s still difficult today.

I have no intention this morning to try and answer the questions of what exactly happens at the communion table. Is the wafer really, literally the body of Christ, or do we eat of the bread to remind us of the body of Christ?

I’ve always found arguments about the Eucharist and what happens and doesn’t happen troubling. Perhaps because it often seems to be abstract and disconnected to real life. How does this make a difference to the here and now? To the mother struggling to bring up her children? Or to the student worrying about their exam results? Or to the husband looking after his wife with dementia?

How do we move from debates about the real presence to how this matters to our very present reality?

You may know the saying, ‘You are what you eat’.
It was best described by Morgan Spurlock in his documentary 15 years ago ‘Super Size Me’. Morgan ate at McDonald’s every day for 30 days and this had a huge impact on his health and well-being. It took him 14 months on a vegan diet to recover.

What we put in our bodies makes a difference.

Saint Augustine in the 3rd Century used the same language to describe what is happening when we take the bread and wine at the Eucharist. He says:

“If you receive the Eucharist well, you are what you eat. …..As you come to communion, you hear the words ‘The Body of Christ’ and you answer ‘Amen’. Be, therefore, members of Christ that your ‘Amen’ may be true… Be what you see. Receive what you already are.” ii

He is saying that when we receive the bread and wine we take into ourselves the very life of Christ.

Jesus tells us that we are to eat and drink of him and his life will then be part of ours and our life will be part of his. We are already united with Christ through baptism and faith. Each time we receive bread and wine we grow in this shared life.

This then makes a difference to the here and now and it’s no longer an abstract idea but a reality of life.

Jesus’ stark and vivid language is a reminder that the Christian life isn’t just about concepts and ideas and interesting debates:

‘Jesus didn’t say: ‘think about this’, ‘prove this’, ‘look at this’, and surely not ‘argue about this’. He said ‘Eat this’, ‘Drink this’ iii

Whether we understand what is happening when we come to the communion table or not we are welcomed and invited to join the feast.

Rowan Williams writes:

‘We take Holy Communion not because we are doing well, but because we are doing badly. Not because we have arrived, but because we are travelling. Not because we are right but because we are confused and wrong. Not because we are divine, but because we are human. Not because we are full but because we are hungry’. iv

Not because we are full, but because we are hungry.
We are to imagine ourselves as hungry children waiting to be fed from a banquet: a banquet that is Christ himself.

As we come to the table later maybe we can reflect on what it is we are hungry for.

Maybe it’s friendship, human love, compassion. Maybe we are hungry for justice in a particular area of our lives. Maybe we are hungry to know God more. Or hungry for our prayers to be answered.

Jesus says ‘my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink’.

And as we are fed we are then commanded to go out into the world to feed others, to be the flesh and blood body of Christ to those who are also hungry.

Remember those words from the beginning:

‘you are loved’, ‘you are forgiven’, ‘dinner is ready’.

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i Richard Burridge, John – The People’s Bible Commentary
ii From St Augustine, Sermons 227 and 229A (abridged translation), 405-411
iii Richard Rohr, ‘Real Presence’, July 24th 2018
iv Rowan Williams, ‘Being Christian’, SPCK, page 53