

Pentecost 11
16/8/2009

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 2:10 – 12, 3:3 - 14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15 - 20

John 6:51 – 58

The living bread that gives life

John's Gospel is rich in image and meaning, and he is a great storyteller, but he only makes one point and he makes it repeatedly. Chapter 6, which begins with the feeding of the 5000, is a long discourse on Jesus as the bread of life: the sustaining presence of God for us. As the narrative unfolds the tone escalates, and the language becomes more exaggerated, a bit like a fisherman's tale. "We caught a fish; we caught a fish this big; we caught a really big fish; you should have seen the fish we caught!" In the reading today Jesus goes beyond the polite word for eating and in fact says his audience must crunch his body with their teeth! [v 54] He is being provocative towards a section of his audience who react with ever deepening incredulity to all talk of a physical connection between Jesus and the bread of life God gives. What message is John working so hard to tell, and why does it bring such a bad reaction amongst his audience?

The Gospel of John is like a crystal or a prism that the author holds up to the light. One by one he shows us another facet of the story, but every time he does this, what we see is the same light that shine through the Prologue in Chapter 1. Namely: *In the beginning was the Word, ...the Word was with God...the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelled amongst us* [John 1:1, 14]. John's point is: the creative, life giving power that God expressed at the beginning of creation, which we experience by faith in so many ways, was embodied in a life like ours and lived among us. *What came into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all people* [John 1:3c-4a]. The message is: there was a life that, in all respects, was life giving and nourishing and we came to believe and declare, that this was a self-manifestation of the Creator, the source who gives life to all. Here is God-with-us, in a life like ours.

The resistance to this proclamation in Chapter 6 is a sign that the idea of God in the flesh was too much for many in Israel to stomach. We also know it was resisted by others in the environment in which John wrote. The Gnostics, a Hellenistic philosophical movement, resisted talk of divine embodiment: God in the flesh. They held the world was so irretrievably flawed and evil it was impossible to believe a good God created it, much less could live in it as we do. The only solution was to distance oneself from the created world, and put one's trust in secret knowledge that, at death, would allow the divine spark that dwelt in the initiated to regain the bliss of heaven. Gnostic ideas did not mesh with Judaism, which continues to believe that God created the world for human life and wellbeing, and continues to express merciful love towards it as a good creation.

The key issue is the idea of divine embodiment: that God became flesh and lived amongst us. Christian faith claims that all God's creative power intended for the world reached its fullest expression in the life and ministry of Jesus who was crucified and rose from the finality of death to a new life with God. [*Gail Ramshaw, Treasures New and Old, Fortress, p 77.*] In the life he lived Jesus embodied God's life for the world. In the Resurrection, God made the life of the Risen Christ present and available to the whole world.

One of the heresies rejected early in the Christian era was the idea that God only seemed to be human: that God's spirit only made use of Jesus' body, and that Christ only appeared to die. The words of the Nicene Creed "*and became truly human*" were forged precisely to counter the thought God in Christ only "seemed" to be present amongst us. The essence of Christian belief is that Jesus is more than a famous healer or teacher: he embodies the fullness of God for the world and this is what makes him truly human.

Everything about Jesus points to his wholeness as a human, wholeness that was nevertheless truly wounded and broken in the place of suffering and death. And when Jesus appears with his wounds at the Resurrection to eat with his disciples, it is another way of saying he was more than a purely "spiritual being" who only seemed to be human, he was truly human in his life with us, and in his life with God.

The language of "crunching, which to us suggests cannibalism is born of John's deep concern to say to the murmurers and the spiritualizers: real encounter with God in Christ is possible. He is present and available in the world. The challenge is to participate in the life he offers. The murmurers ask: *How can this man give us his flesh to eat?* And Jesus stretches the language to drive home the point: *...unless: you eat the flesh and drink the blood...you have no life in you.* [John 6:52 – 53] For his audience and for us, this is so shocking and distasteful the only real possibility is it cannot be taken literally. The meaning is: through his humanity (his body) and his suffering (his blood) the life of Jesus "quickens us" in a way that is born of God. His embodiment of the life of God for us, in his living, and as the one God raised up, opened a pathway for us to receive the life and healing God wills for the world. The call to "feed on him" is the call to receive him and assimilate what he gave through his life and death. If we are prepared to do that, the promise is it will yield the nourishment and life God wills for the whole world.

We do indeed come here to feed on Jesus. We feed on his words. And we join in the actions of eating bread and drinking wine that he gave to us the night before he died. He invites to this table, all who love him, and seek to live the life he offers, which is a life that is forever joined to the creative power of God. He makes the power of God present and available. Feeding on him means being willing to trust God in the same way as he did, and live according to his pattern: the pattern of the Cross.

The problems of the language are real, but the call to eat and drink of Jesus, and the practice of doing this together is here for a purpose. Eating and drinking is a graphic way of saying this is not some ethereal reality, or some abstract philosophical truth. What was embodied in him, is meant to become embodied in us. It also points to the fact that once we eat and drink together here, not only are we joined to Jesus, we are joined to one another. This collection of bodies becomes a body, a community nourished and refreshed by him. A community that gives itself to live on the basis of his self-giving, that did not hold anything back from God.
