

Pentecost 12
19/8/2012

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 2:10 – 12, 3:3 - 14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15 - 20

John 6:51 – 58

The living bread, the sustaining presence of God

Sometimes it is difficult to hear the same story again. Some of the people in Jesus' audience found that. John chapter 6 begins with the feeding of the 5000 then follows a long discourse on the bread of life. Only one point is made, but it is made again, and again and again. People got sick of it, some were offended, and some left.

As the narrative unfolds the tone escalates, and the language becomes more exaggerated. In the reading today Jesus goes beyond the polite word for eating and in fact says his audience must munch or 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 sustaining presence of God who gives us life. What message is John working so hard to tell, and why does it bring such a bad reaction amongst his audience?

The whole of the Gospel of John really only tells us one thing, in many different ways. Step by step Jesus shows us another facet of the story, but every time he does this, what we see is the same light that shines through the Prologue in Chapter 1. *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]. Near the end of the Gospel John says: [this] *is written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing ...may have life in his name* [20:31].

John's point is: the creative, life giving power that God expressed at the beginning of creation, 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 like ours that, in all respects, was life giving and nourishing. The first Christians came to believe and declare, that this was a self-manifestation of the Creator, the source who gives life to all.

John's proclamation of God-with-us was resisted. In Chapter 6 the idea of God in the flesh was too much for Jesus' contemporaries to stomach. We also know the idea was resisted by others in the environment in which John wrote. The Gnostics, a Hellenistic philosophical movement, resisted the idea that God could become 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 and everything in it for human life and well being, and understands the world as good. And God continues to express merciful love towards the world, and everything in it.

Christian faith claims that all God's creative power reached its fullest expression in the life and ministry of Jesus. In him the power of life made itself manifest: it became tangible, as love that suffers.

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 did not suffer but only appeared to die. The words of the Nicene Creed "*and became truly human*" were forged precisely to counter the thought that 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 of ethics: what makes him fully human is that he embodies the fullness of God for the world.

The language of "munching and crunching" comes from 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 opened a pathway for us to receive the life and healing God wills for the world. That pathway involves living in complete trust of God. The call to "feed on him" is the call to receive him and assimilate what he gave through his life and death, and the promise is this stance will yield the nourishment and life God wills for the whole world, and we will have eternal life. It is worth knowing that there is an old understanding in Judaism that the Law was consumed by the people who absorbed it like food.

We do indeed come here to feed on Jesus. We digest his words to us, and words about him. And we join in the actions 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 eternally creative power of God. Feeding on him means being willing to trust God in the same way as he did. It means being prepared to live according to his pattern, the pattern of the Cross.

The problems of the language are real, the listening and learning, and the eating and drinking go together for a purpose. To demonstrate that what was embodied in him, is meant to become embodied in us. And once we are joined to him by these actions, we are joined to one another. This collection of bodies becomes a body, a living community nourished and refreshed by him. A community that gives itself to live on the basis of his self-giving: self-giving that did not hold anything back from God.
