

I want to begin this morning by using our imagination - I want you to think of going out for a meal. It might be a posh restaurant, or a Chinese or Indian or maybe McDonald's or the local fish and chip shop.

We look at the menu, the variety of meals on offer. What will I choose? Will I go for what I always have or will I be a bit more adventurous?

How about the sweet and sour prawn?

What is satay when it is at home?

Or will I have the McBacon?

Decisions. And while I work my way through the menu the waiter is waiting, pen hanging over the pad.

At last I choose something off the menu - the waiter heads off to the kitchen and a meal is prepared solely for me - this is my choice - this is what I want.

Finally my meal is brought and put in front of me - for me to eat - for me to enjoy.

John, chapter 6, from which we have read today and last week, is a long discourse on food. It begins with the feeding of the five thousand. There then follows the stilling of the storm and then a long discourse (of which today's Gospel reading is a part) with Jewish leaders who have come to Jesus looking for a sign and they throw up the example of the people being fed with manna in the wilderness during the time of Moses.

Jesus describes himself as the bread of life, the true bread that has come down from heaven. He then begins to use language that his hearers find confusing and indeed disturbing. In fact, as we read later on in this same chapter, so disturbing that some who had followed him up to that point fall away - he has gone too far.

He declares "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (v 51)

This bread is my flesh - what is he talking about? There is something of a flavour of sacrifice about his language. But then he goes further, using language that anyone familiar with Jewish sacrificial practices would have found even more controversial than his previous comments. "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood, you have no life in you." (v 53)

Before we go any further, I think that it is worth gathering a few points together that we need to keep in mind as we reflect on this passage.

As I said the language Jesus uses has something of the flavour of sacrifice. In the context of Jewish sacrifice (remember the people he was speaking to were Jews) the blood of the sacrifice was never drunk indeed Orthodox Jews will only eat meat from which all the blood has been drained. The reason is blood represents the life of the animal and life, all life belongs to God. So when Jesus speaks of the need to drink the blood of the Son of Man it just added to the sense of confusion and indignation on the part of his hearers.

Secondly, unlike the other three Gospels, St John, in his account of the Last Supper, makes no mention of Jesus inaugurating the service of Holy Communion. Scholars generally regard this section of St John's Gospel, chapter 6, as giving John's own thinking on the significance of the Holy Communion; they would see the words "This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world" as almost equivalent to words of Jesus at the Last Supper, "Take eat, this is my body ..."

Finally there is the rather obvious point that, as at the Last Supper, Jesus is here, in the flesh, as he says these words. So the language is figurative - but for all that the image is still very powerful. Even the words John uses for "eat" in the original Greek. He begins using the word "esqiw", which is the ordinary word for eating. As the passage progresses he uses the word "trwgv" which means literally "crunch". To go back to the illustration I used at the beginning, there is a sense as the passage progresses of a move from tasting a meal to, once you realise you like it, setting about to eat it with relish.

Both the account of the Last Supper and this 6th chapter of St John's Gospel, contain obvious references to the coming death of Jesus and both contain references to feeding upon his body.

As I was reflecting at the outset, there is something very personal about eating. It is I who take the food, it is I who eats it and swallows it; it is for the nourishment of my body. And if it is good I will eat it with relish.

What we are thinking about here, as we reflect on this 6th chapter of St John, as we recall Jesus words at his Last Supper, is no ordinary meal. This is a meal prepared by God in Christ; the very finest of fare as he offers himself, once and for all, upon the Cross for the life of the world.

Looking at the communion from the perspective of this 6th chapter John's Gospel, there is no longer the argument as to what happens to the bread and wine in the prayer of consecration. The emphasis now falls on the whole action of the service. As together, as members of the Body of Christ, we participate in the breaking of bread, the pouring of the wine; as

together in prayer we remember the events of Christ's passion and death, the drama of our redemption; as we come to receive the bread and wine, broken and poured in remembrance of his body broken upon the Cross,; as we hear the words "The Body of Christ keep you in eternal life. The Blood of Christ keep you in eternal life." the very core of the Gospel is proclaimed to us individually.

As I remember I eat; as I eat I remember. As I eat and drink I feed in my heart on the Body and Blood of Christ, I lay hold of the benefits of his Passion, I look forward to joining with him in the heavenly banquet.

For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.