

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - August 26th 2018,

sermon preached at St John's Timberhill

by Fr Christopher Wood

St John's Gospel chapter 6, v 60 to 69

There are times and there are issues when choices seem straight forward, if not always easy or without cost; and there are times that are simply more complicated and issues that are complex even in the light of faith.

That very quotable British writer G K Chesterton, motivated by his faith, could be quite clear and uncompromising, almost confrontational. As the 1930's dawned and the clouds gathered he said "In our own time it is clear; there is light and dark; each must choose which side they are on."

History proved him right. But even outside of such a historical context, which may or may not mirror our own, there are other voices of faith continually reminding us of the radical truth of the message of Christ.

Teresa of Calcutta said simply to a gathering of clergy "if words don't shed the light of Christ, they only serve to increase the darkness." A church that loves to talk needs to be reminded like that. And any holy scholar of prayer knows that in the response to God of any faithful person, listening is more important than speaking. I think that is a balance that Pope Francis is attempting to get right in Ireland this very weekend.

Today finally brings us to the end of this long chapter of St John's Gospel, and Our Lord's sermon on himself as the bread of life. And today we are invited to decide once again on our own responses to the extraordinary claims Christ makes for himself, and to the extraordinary language in which he expresses himself.

We are told that the response of many of those disciples of Our Lord who heard this striking language was to turn away from Christ. The way Our Lord speaks of himself is described as 'hard'. The Bible I was reading for myself was the Jerusalem Bible and it translates it as 'This is intolerable language', which sounds rather like someone writing to the *Daily Mail* to complain about swearing on the BBC, but at least it captures the sense that they are actually shocked and in fact driven away from Christ by the very way that he speaks.

And, do you know, this is quite understandable: we've been told that we must eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood, or we cannot have life in us. The Lord's flesh and blood are life-giving because he himself is sent by the Father and draws life from the Father. This encapsulates the central mystery of Christ's identity. He is at once absolutely flesh and blood, as we are, living and breathing, sweating and thirsting when it's hot, bleeding when he is pierced and dying when he is hung on the tree.

But at the same time he is absolutely united to His heavenly Father, eternally bound up with him and the Holy Spirit the source of all life, all existence. Completely enfolded as Julian of Norwich would say.

Most extraordinary of all, though, is that he invites all people to share in this mysterious union with the Father through sharing, in the most intimately physical act of eating and drinking, in his human life, his human death and his human rising from the dead. This invitation is given, in this sermon recorded by St John, in words both beautiful and horrifying, both wonderful and appalling. We are used to them as people of faith which is reassuring but it also leads us to lose the impact of just how shocking all of this was to the first hearers of the Gospel.

Our Lord actually emphasizes his point by changing the word for "eat" into the word for "chew" at this point. He intends to shock. He is almost saying "Chew on that.....these are indeed hard words and hard choices.

And you can see from to-day's Gospel that it led people, there and then, to decide. To make a choice.

Little wonder, then, that the majority turn away. This invitation seems too magnificent to be real and too ghastly to accept. As it was in the beginning, so it is now: if the Christian Gospel is preached authentically, preached as it was first preached, it will inevitably meet with this reaction, and we know that it has done so since the earliest days of the Church. Pretty cribs and Messy church and the like all have their place no doubt, but the church MUST preach a radical Gospel too if it is to be authentic to Our Lord Jesus Christ. People like Arch Bishop Oscar Romero, who knew full well that he was inviting martyrdom at his own altar in our own age, preached a Gospel that connects completely with the Christ we hear preaching in St John's Gospel to-day.

Neither should we feel ashamed when we hear of these listeners in to-day's Gospel, if this same reaction rises in our hearts too. The mystery of who Christ is, and of the life he offers us, is deeper than the ocean

and higher than the heavens. It's like the sun bursting in, and if we find ourselves blinking and tempted to put the pillow over our heads, that is only natural.

But the warmth of this sun seduces us out of our hiding places, and its brightness dares us to gaze at it, until we can do so unblinkingly in the glorious light of heaven.

One of the vital themes of St John's Gospel is this challenge to enter into the light, for all that it will show up our faults and failings, we are not to be like those who prefer to scurry off into the dark corners. The choice is ours. The philosopher Pascal said "There's enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadow for those who don't." He could have had to-day's Gospel of choice in mind.

Actually, there is a third possible reaction that the Gospel does not envisage. Perhaps it wasn't possible at the time, when Our Lord was walking the earth, but it is possible and common enough now. That is to pretend that Jesus did not say what he said, or did not mean what he said. It's the temptation to reduce the mystery to a manageable size, to reassure ourselves that *of course* Jesus doesn't *really* offer us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink... *of course* Jesus isn't really saying that the sacramental sharing in his life and death are the doorway, the means by which we enter into the eternal life of God.

The very nature of our liturgy in this church tells you clearly what we believe, what sort of faith we embrace.

These hard words of Christ are, as St Peter says, 'the words of eternal life'. We can say with him that 'we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.' It doesn't matter that we cannot comprehend the mystery of the Eucharist; We simply acknowledge the mystery.....all will become clear in due time.

It does matter that we acknowledge the reality of the invitation it offers us. The response is up to us. We must simply be aware that as the culture and the principles and the history of our society evolves, our faith may require us to make hard choices.

Poor old St Peter , whose image looks back at me from that far corner of this church, gets such a rough ride in so many sermons. But his simple response to Christ in to-day's sermon was nothing if not honest. He was right. To whom else, after all, shall we go? **Amen**