

'The food of the fully grown'

A sermon preached on the 12th Sunday after Trinity

By the Dean

There are words and phrases which sometimes jump out at you and, without you realising it, start to change your perceptions, working in secret in the secret of your subconscious.

One such phrase for me comes from the Confessions of St Augustine, where he imagines the voice of Jesus saying to him, 'I am the food of the fully grown, grow and you will feed on me, and you will not change me into you, like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.'

Now I've been coming to Communion since I was a child, and hearing that Gospel reading from John for decades, but it needed the interpretation of Augustine to help me see it again in all its startling, disturbing, beautiful power.

It is, if we try and imagine that we are hearing those words as if for the first time, after all, a fairly shocking series of images that John has Jesus use. One which, if it was truly what he said in the precincts of the Temple enough to stir up a crowd to take up stones against him. To suggest that he is offering his flesh for the world, that it is necessary to eat his flesh in order to see salvation, is even for us deeply disturbing until we clothe it in Eucharistic imagery. For Jesus' contemporaries, it would have been unthinkable to revisit the ancient Israelite horror and prohibition against human sacrifice, the sin of Moloch, but John uses these words in his gospel deliberately, his gospel which we think of theologically as preached material, a mediation if you like on the gospel stories, and through which he is seeking to make explicit the link between Jesus' sacrificial death and the Eucharist which we celebrate day by day.

So far so good, but why did the words of Augustine with which I began strike me so powerfully? I suppose it's because I have over the years absorbed a fairly standard catholic Anglican understanding of the Eucharist: it's the place of forgiveness, of nurture, of community, of spiritual food. What I haven't ever really absorbed is the more Orthodox understanding of 'Deisis', of transformation, slowly, imperceptibly, patiently into the likeness of God, which is what Augustines words, and I believe those of today's Gospel are inviting us into. That I think is what struck me as an understanding of what I, and I know you have been about for so many years, not a Protestant understanding of a communal meal, spiritual food which you absorb, or even just of a Catholic understanding of absorbing the very essence of the real presence of Jesus, but something rather more radical, startling, of a different kind of food which, as you partake of it Sunday by Sunday slowly transforms you into the likeness of the one who gives it, gives himself. Not like the food which we have to keep eating to keep us alive, this food 'en-Christ's' us, and I suggest gives us the clue to understanding the startling language in today's gospel.

A central pillar of the gospel of John is the understanding of the unity of Jesus as Son with the Father who sends him. The Prologue sets the scene: in Jesus we see The Word of God made flesh, and everything which follows from that serves only to emphasise the central truth that here is a different understanding from Mark's Son of Man, Matthew's new Moses, Luke's Universal Messiah. This is the foundation stone of the credal Statement we make every week: 'God from God, Light from Light'. In John's Jesus we see the Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ, who is absolutely one with the Father. And the consequence of his being one with the Father is that through his humanity, we are one with the Father as well, and the way in which we understand that oneness, that unity, is at the altar where we kneel week by week.

And it's not, as in more personalised Protestant devotion, properly understood as a private individual sacramental moment when 'I make MY communion', it's a communal, corporate act where we kneel or stand in a new understanding of family, or society. For here, as we eat and drink together, we do perhaps without thinking about it, the most radical act possible. We are unboundaried. Here, at the altar, divisions of class, race, wealth, tribe are utterly irrelevant. The same fragment of bread, the same sip of wine for the Queen and the homeless beggar, for the criminal and the saint, for the torturer and his victim. That is the outrageousness of our God, something so beyond the barriers of human justice that the only place it can take us is to the foot of the cross where unreconciled suffering and sin meet boundless unquenchable love and compassion.

If you think about it, there is nowhere else in all human interaction which is so devoid of the crisscrossing network of limitations and caveats than the altar, and we ignore its radical inclusiveness at our peril.

'How does it feel' I asked a Churchwardens at my former church, knowing her to be a Judge on the Immigration Appeals Tribunal, 'to kneel next to fellow members of the congregation who you know to be illegal immigrants?' 'It feels fine', she said, 'because here, all judgment is suspended.'

So perhaps say that to yourself, know it inwardly and deeply as you come to Communion today. 'Here all judgment is suspended.' Your sense of uncertainty, or unworthiness, your preoccupations and fears...set them in that context.

Here you are transformed, little by little into the likeness of the one who has known and loved you since before time began, here you join with brothers and sisters throughout the ages in an act of utter simplicity and radical, transforming grace.

It transcends time and physicality which is why say amen to those haunting words:

'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them...the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'

Amen