

Sermon Series John 6

3: Jesus with us - John 6: 51-58

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

This fragment from our Gospel reading today is also the opening sentence to our service. If taken literally, you would perhaps wonder what is going on? I said in my first sermon in this series, that chapter 6 of John's Gospel is possibly the most famous and infamous, given the persecution of the early Christians in the first millennia, in part because they were thought to indulge in cannibalism. Perhaps if you questioned this part of the Gospel, you wouldn't be the only ones. Even Jesus' disciples said in verse 60, which we'll hear next week, "This teaching is difficult." It begs the question, as to how we interpret scripture, or indeed any written text. Our world is dominated by text: newsprint, facebook, contracts, novels, scripts, liturgies, the list goes on. Understanding the meaning of these things can often be a nuanced process. And why would our scriptures, among the most complex and profound writings in the world be any different? In fact, the interpretation of scripture has kept many theologians in business for two thousand years. So today I want to explore how we interpret scripture using these 8 verses, and in the process, come to a deeper understanding of this text which is John's version of the introduction to the sacrament, we know as Holy Communion or the Eucharist.

Well, there are many lenses through which you can look at scripture, and the way we read scripture or any text often depends on our own cultural background and life experience. And this is also reflected by the many translations and interpretations of scripture. I counted 6 different versions of the Bible on my own bookshelf. Today I want to introduce a model of looking at scripture that has stood the test of time. It was developed in the

Alexandrian School in the first few hundred years after Jesus. Alexandria, a city in Egypt at the mouth of the Nile, founded by Alexander the Great, was the centre of learning in the Roman Empire. It was home to the famous Alexandrian Library which contained over 700,000 volumes at its peak and was a place where the intellectual elite of the ancient world, from across religions and philosophies, could meet and influence each other. This model of scriptural analysis was developed over time starting with Philo, a Jewish intellectual and teacher in the first century and further evolved by Origen, a Christian theologian in the third century. The model seeks to find truth by looking at scripture from a literal historical perspective, from a social moral perspective and also from an intellectual spiritual perspective. Origen believed that all scripture was inspired by God and that texts that seem absurd are simply proof of a deeper spiritual meaning. Let's see how it applies to our eight verses today.

So, as we read this scripture today, how many of you felt like the crowd, and wondered "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" When presented with text, people do tend to take what is written, or even spoken, at face value. But as Origen said, if something seems absurd, there must be a deeper meaning. And we know there is a deeper meaning because across this chapter there has been a theme of mystical bread running throughout. From the miracle or sign of the feeding of the 5000 at the beginning of the chapter, to the following discussion of the manna in the wilderness and to last week, Jesus declaring that "I am the bread of life". And as we reflected last week, this is clearly a metaphor, an expression that means something else, a metaphor for Jesus being the one who nurtures and sustains us.

This week Jesus takes it to a whole new level and a literal historical perspective informs us to the meaning of "eating my flesh and drinking my blood". You might recall that at the beginning of the chapter, we were told

that it was near the time of Passover. The festival of Passover came about when God instructed Moses and the Israelites to kill a lamb, mark the door frame with the blood of the lamb and then prepare a meal with the lamb. The Lord God would then pass over all the houses with the marked door frames and those households would be saved. And every year after this, the Jewish people celebrated Passover, and the meal with the Passover lamb is cooked in remembrance. Does that sound familiar? In the 3 synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus institutes the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper at the Passover meal the day before he died. Do this in remembrance of me, he instructs his disciples.

In John's Gospel, which doesn't introduce the Eucharist in the same way as the other 3 gospels, Jesus is launched at his baptism in chapter 1, verse 29 as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." In John's theology, Jesus is the Christian Passover lamb and the Eucharist is the Christian Passover feast. Christ the Passover lamb was slain and by his death, he bore the sin of the world, and through him we are saved.

When seen through the historical lens of Passover, our Gospel reading today makes much more sense. Let's read through it again.

Jesus says "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

In this opening verse, Jesus is building on the theme of his identity as the one who nurtures and sustains, and who has been sent to us by God, who has come down from heaven. And he continues to develop the bread metaphor by introducing the "eating" of it. Just as we eat bread to feed and sustain us, Jesus calls us to believe in him, who sustains us and gives us life forever. And then he says "and the bread that I will give for the life of the

world is my flesh.” And here Jesus jumps from metaphor to prophesy. He’s already said back in chapter 3 when he was talking to Nicodemus that he will be “lifted up” and he follows this up with the prediction that he will give his flesh for the life of the world. In this prediction of his death, Jesus’ words have broad social and cosmic implications. His death gives life to the world. And the people are finding this hard to understand, just as many do today. So Jesus continues. “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

In these words we can hear echoes of the words of the prayers said by the priest during Holy Communion, which are taken from the other Gospels recalling the Last Supper. John’s Gospel, written after the other three, assumes knowledge of this tradition and is a reflection on it. And we know that Jesus doesn’t mean to literally eat his flesh and drink his blood because this would have gone against the well-known dietary laws of the Jewish people. John is saying that when you believe in Jesus, when you consume him, in his life as the Word which became flesh as the person called Jesus, and in his death when his blood was spilt on the cross, you will have eternal life, life now and life ever after.

As we read these words, it is perhaps tempting to take them as a purely spiritual eating and drinking, that our belief is confined to grateful meditation, celebration and contemplation. All these are important, but John’s use of the original Greek language implies that actual eating and drinking occurs, and the best explanation for this is that John understands Jesus to refer here to the Eucharist, the Lords Supper, the Holy Communion, the Christian version of the Passover meal. This sacrament, in which Jesus’ body and blood are,

in some mysterious way, offered to believers to be eaten and drunk. Here at the climax of this chapter, Jesus declares that in this sacrament his believing followers, us, live in him and he in us. And he continues in this vein for the last two verses of our reading today.

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Jesus closes as he opened 8 verses ago, emphasizing his relationship with God and that belief, faith in him, a relationship with him, leads to life ever after.

Well, I hope that this has helped you to understand this difficult text. As I've tried to unpack it with you, I've been conscious of that model of biblical analysis developed so many years ago, how our understanding of scripture can be assisted by looking at it from the historical literal perspective and the intellectual spiritual perspective. These 8 verses surely demonstrate that scripture has many layers. Shortly, we will journey through the liturgy of the Eucharist, and we will together participate in the mysterious and social act of receiving the sacrament, the body and blood of Christ, when I will say to each of you, the body of Christ, the bread of heaven. And you will be able to take this Gospel reading today into your experience of God's presence, of Holy Communion.

Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God, we give you thanks that you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to live as one of us. As we participate in Holy Communion, we pray that your presence be with us in the bread and the

wine. We pray that you restore us, sustain us and make us as new, so we can live life in your name, in faith, now and fore ever. Amen.