

BIBLE READING: John 6: 51-58

SERMON

According to the scholars there is every reason to believe that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum during Passover. Why should that be significant? Because Jesus the day before had miraculously fed several thousand men and women and then he had walked across the stormy lake. During Passover, passages from Exodus would have been studied, just like we have passages dealing with Jesus birth at Christmas and his death at Easter. Among these passages would have been the passage that dealt with the movement of the children of Israel through the Red Sea, and the feeding of the people in the wilderness with mana.

The impact and comparisons made by the people were plain - this is the prophet (6:14); they ask him to make clear his prophetic link with Moses (6:30,31). They think that Jesus is another Moses - who will lead his people out of bondage into the promised land. The feeding of the 5000 men makes it clear that there were enough men to form a legion, an army that easily could expel the Romans. They attempt to seize him (6:15) to make him their king. Jesus gives them no satisfaction, they start to grumble (6:41) which then progresses to angry arguments (6:52) and finally many of Jesus' followers turned back and would not go with him anymore (6:66).

What caused the grumbling, argument, anger and desertion? Basically because Jesus started to make statements that disillusioned, scandalised and repulsed them.

They were disillusioned because Jesus denied connection with Moses. If he had been a new Moses, he would have had the ear of God - he would have been able to feed the people, he would have led them to military victory; defeat would have been impossible.

What scandalised them were the connections he made between himself and God. Yes, like Moses, Jesus supplied manna, but unlike Moses Jesus went on to say that he was also bread of life (6:35) - that he came from heaven and was God's food. This began to sound like blasphemy. Argument broke out - what was Jesus on about? The Greek indicates quite violent debate, possibly people trading physical as well as verbal blows. When you remember that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue - it becomes even more startling. Imagine people shouting out in the middle of my sermon, then people arguing about what I was meaning by what I'd said and laying into one another - amazing!

What repulses them is that Jesus goes on and talks not only of eating his flesh but drinking his blood! If there was one law that Jews took seriously (and they took them all seriously) it was the requirement not to eat flesh that had blood in it, or drink blood. That Jesus tells them that eternal life is only possible by eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:54). In fact he makes it even more repulsive as the Greek we translate "eats my flesh and drinks my blood" actually refers to munching and slurping - eating and drinking with relish. Earlier references to eating mean eating. In verse 54 it changes to munching, crunching and slurping. People were offended by his blasphemy and his flesh and blood images.

Jesus points out that his words bring God's life-giving Spirit (6:63), yet for many, his colourful language and his claims about his relationship with God were too much and many turned back. Unlike those who turned back, we know the rest of the story; we know that Jesus went to the cross and died for our sins and then rose from the dead giving us the opportunity to have a relationship through his Spirit with God the Father.

Knowing all this makes Jesus' words obvious and to an extent redundant - when you know Jesus personally as the Son of God, it makes sense for Jesus to say "for the bread that God gives is he who comes down from heaven and gives his life for the world" (6:33).

For those who do not have a relationship with Jesus, it doesn't matter how the story ends, Jesus' words are a stumbling block. We mightn't be offended by his blasphemy by his claim that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood smacks of cannibalism. A claim levelled at Christians numerous times in history.

What does Jesus mean? How can we understand what Jesus is saying to us when he says that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we will not experience eternal life or enter into relationship with God through himself?

Some say that what Jesus is talking about here is Communion or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist - or whatever you call it. To an extent this is true - the Lord's supper clearly points us to the body and blood of Jesus and reminds us of his death and his sacrifice for us. But this is only what we read into this passage. Actually Jesus is talking about becoming one with him. Becoming his follower, his servant. In verse 53, the verbal form means once for all - that unless we once for all eat his flesh and drink his blood we will not have eternal life. This means that the action of eating and drinking is a once off occasion. This occasion is when we accept Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord.

Jesus' use of flesh and blood is symbolic. In other places and other gospels Jesus talks about us entering into God's kingdom, entering into faith - here he talks about the kingdom entering into us; Paul talks about our life in Christ, here talks about his life in us! Jesus is saying to us that if we would be his followers we must devour him - make him a part of our life. As bread is eaten and strengthens the body, so we must eat his flesh. There is a sense in which he wants us to be gluttons, greedy for him - munching and slurping.

We devour him as we learn more about him, his actions, his words which we find in Scripture both New and Old Testaments. We enter into eternal life as we absorb his words and actions and make them our own. Jesus wants us to live in him and for him to live in us.

What does this imply for our daily lives?

Firstly, that we continually read the Bible and take to our heart the word of God. We need to be people who know the scriptures and are willing to live by them.

Secondly, we must not only know about the requirements and promises of God; we must be willing to obey and accept what God has for us.

And Thirdly it is important to remember also that in eating Jesus' flesh we become his flesh - his body, and so we need to remember to meet with one another, building one another up in love, correcting one another and praising God in all things.