

## Moses and the Burning Bush

Bible Reading: John 6: 51-58

I don't know if it's just me, and my anxieties, but many conversations I have with other parents sooner or later get around to eating – how well, or how badly, our children eat. We speak admiringly of the children who clear their plates, the adventurous who willingly try new foods and the grateful who eat whatever is put in front of them. Stories of children who appear to live on thin air are greeted with mystified head shaking and sympathy for the parents. Finding and eating the right food is a complex business – in part because ideas about what is good and healthy for our children can change quickly - and because we don't know exactly what is in our foods – although food labelling has helped a lot. We tend to be a bit anxious about food and what is best for us. If all this sounds an ungrateful reflection on our food – it's not supposed to be – we're all very aware of the vast numbers of people who simply don't have enough to eat – never mind about having the luxury to question exactly what they are eating!

It is in a world where there is a lot of uncertainty and mistrust about food and where many are starving, that we hear afresh Jesus' words over the millennia "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day". As we hear them again we may or may not feel shocked. Jesus' hearers would certainly have been shocked. They would have been shocked to hear a Jew talk about "eating flesh" and "drinking blood", Leviticus – the OT book most concerned with religious ritual and purity – absolutely forbid eating, or drinking for that matter, any blood. Today we may be shocked – not for the same reasons as Jewish people – we don't after all eat Kosher food, we're not bound by the laws in Leviticus – but maybe it sounds to us a bit like cannibalism – still one of our greatest taboos. Or maybe we're shocked because we're challenged to believe that in some way, something as immense as "eternal life" is linked with some bizarre eating and drinking of a man who died 2000 years ago!

For all its shocking quality Jesus' claim is worth getting our heads around because "eternal life" is at stake. John's gospel defines "eternal life" – he moves it beyond vague understanding of "life after death", he gives it some content. Jesus promises to those who come to him in faith that he will "raise them up on the last day". Jesus' promise is about rising up from death to life, at some sort of end time. As St John explains "eternal life" is also a quality of life on offer today to all who believe. "Eternal life", the phrase, tells us that this life we enjoy on earth, with God, lasts an eternity. We continue in the life of God, when we eat and drink from Jesus, and this life with God continues after death, blossoming into the resurrection life that we will enjoy.

Some people, perhaps because they are so shocked at the image, are tempted to make "eating Jesus' flesh and "drinking his blood", sort of "spiritual activities". In this way we can move away from some of the troubling ideas about "cannibalism and life blood" and move it to safer water, with ideas about meditation and contemplation – safe internal events that involve our intellects rather than our mouths, we might say, for example, that we feed on Jesus by reading the Bible and times of prayer.

All of these are important - the spiritual disciplines of our faith - but I'm more persuaded by those who believe that In John's gospel Jesus was actually talking about eating, physically, after all Jesus is the word made flesh. Tom Wright points out that, St John writing in Greek, chose to use a very solid word for "eat", it was the word often used by Greek speakers to mean something like "munch" or "chew" and might have been used to describe the ways that animals ate – with lots of delight and noise! Those who munch my flesh have eternal life! Mmm

For me, by far the best interpretation of the passage is that St John understands Jesus as talking about The Lord's Supper, or as we call it Holy Communion – the meal in which, in

some mysterious way we share in all that Jesus has done for us on the cross, we share in his on-going life today as we will share in his resurrection. Implicit in the prayers we make at Communion is an understanding and acceptance of who Jesus is ...the Messiah, God's son. The sacrament of communion is to be received in faith and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, its not magic. We do, of course, I suggest need to guard against being over literal about "body and blood".

The word "body" in the NT has the meaning "person as a whole". In receiving the body of Christ, the bread in communion, then we understand that we are receiving fully and totally Jesus as a whole person. In receiving and eating the bread of communion we are reminded of Jesus given up to death on the cross for us, by God, and we share in the benefits of his death. Like wise in receiving the cup we are reminded of the covenant sealed by the giving up of Jesus to death on the cross and share in its benefits. In communion we share in the life of Christ. And today, in the absence of wine, that sharing is total; we still receive Jesus as a whole. The church has traditionally taught that even if we receive only the bread, the body of Christ, we still share fully in all that he did for us on the cross.

I hope and pray that Jesus words leave us not troubled as it did Jesus' first hearers, but rather hopeful – full of hope that despite the troubles and trials of this life we who have received Jesus as his table, will be raised up on the last day and enjoy new resurrected life. Such is the joy and promise given to us by our Lord Jesus. Food that will that will never harm, but food that will help us to grow as God's children, food that will sustain us through our journey – in this life and the next, food that will keep us alive eternally. Amen.