

Pentecost 11B, 16th August, 2009
St Alban's, Epping
John 6:51-58
Eating His Flesh

Thank you for the invitation....it's a joy to be back here.

I'm probably remembered here for being the most awkward server ever. I had no idea what I was doing in the sanctuary –but it was all totally new to me at that time – despite being an Anglican for 20 years of my adult life, I'd never seen vestments, had no clue about church seasons and colours, had not even experienced candles on the altar; even the prayer book was a foreign entity.

For some years I'd been making a lonely spiritual journey away from evangelical Anglicanism. I'd come to St Albans hungry for more than the Bible teaching that was the diet in my old parish. I was in search of intelligent and honest engagement with the Scriptures; I desired freedom to ask questions, and permission to not have all the answers and to find the grey rather than all being black and white. And this was a solitary journey –there was not a lot of encouragement in that tradition for women or men to question the status quo. I am not wanting to be critical—I was nurtured and formed in my journey of faith within that tradition, and I'm thankful for that – but it was and is a journey, and it was necessary to move on in order to explore the faith beyond the prescribed boundaries. And thankfully God gave me the courage to do that.

And so, I found myself here, nine years ago. I first came to the 8am service; it was quieter, non-threatening: none of those things I found scary like processions and robed choirs. And I had absolutely no idea what a "Sung Eucharist" was, and I wasn't at all sure that I'd like it! I did eventually "graduate" to the 10am service. Over the months, I was drawn into the rhythm of the prayer book, and drawn towards and held by the centrality of the Eucharist.

Within this environment and this tradition, the calling that I had known for many years, blossomed – I seemed to be set free simply by being in a place that allowed people to be who they are in God's sight. I had fed this calling through working in significant professional capacities for the church, and fed it through other leadership activities at parish and diocesan level, but that wasn't enough. It was here that I was able to hear God's voice clearly and act on it. Thank you John, and parish, for your love and encouragement and guidance in the journey.

As so many other Sydney men and women in the catholic Anglican tradition know, to follow this calling to the priesthood means leaving Sydney; for me, it also it meant disrupting my children's lives; the implications were enormous. Both my children graciously encouraged me, despite the huge losses and changes it would bring to their lives.

And so here I am. Sydney is no longer home. Over these past 5 years in Melbourne, my journey has continued: very painful in the necessary letting go of the old in those early years, but that's critical in one's formation as priest. This has been more than a journey of acquiring theological knowledge and particular skills, this is a journey which has taken me into a deep transformation of person. In becoming priest, this journey is very much one that continually draws me deeper into God, and as I'm discovering, at the core of this calling and this journey is the Eucharist.

Jesus said, "I am the living breadwhoever eats of this bread will live forever; and

the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v.51).

And so it happens that today's Gospel passage directs us into the heart of Eucharist ministry.

Ten to fifteen years ago, all this was to me was the Lord's Supper, a set of memorial actions recalling Jesus' last meal with his disciples, something we did in church once a month. The bread and wine was just bread and wine, what mattered was the expressed faith of the receiver, and God's transforming power was dependent on that human faith. Today's passage challenges us: is this what the Eucharist is for us? Or is there something more?

Unlike the other Gospels, John's Gospel does not give us a Eucharistic foreshadowing with the Last Supper. Instead, early in his Gospel, we are fed with a prolonged discourse about hunger and bread: Jesus feeds the 5,000, he describes himself as the living bread, he invites his followers to feed on him. He claims to be able to satisfy the gnawing emptiness of body and soul: "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (v.35). But now Jesus begins to talk about eating in a very different way. The original Greek words are graphic: "if you really want something to eat, you need to chew on my flesh and drink my blood...those who really grind my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...they abide in me and I in them". This is no longer just a polite eating or the easy swallowing of something palatable. Jesus now uses these words over and over, striking with an emphasis impossible to ignore.

This is not only radically new for those around him to hear—it is deeply offensive and shocking for Jewish ears, to the extent that many of his followers left him, scandalized. It smacks of cannibalism (which, of course, the early Church was accused of).

Jesus is now taking us beyond the soft and spiritualised metaphor of himself as the "bread of life". He's taking us beyond the image of bread as a staple food. Beyond any equating of himself with the manna from God with which the Israelites were fed in the wilderness back in Moses' time. This is not just a pretty and comforting picture of God providing what is needed for material and spiritual life. Jesus' confronting and offensive words blast away any notions of keeping this metaphorical - the ancestors supped on the manna— while Jesus talks about an intentional gnawing of his flesh for eternal life— not some easy eating of something passively received.

The physicality of Jesus' words – flesh, gnawing, blood – point to the stark reality of the incarnation of Jesus; there is no avoiding that God has come to be present in the world in real flesh and blood. Later there's to be no avoiding that Jesus dies a real death, and experiences a real resurrection. Jesus' invitation to feed on him isn't an offer to take his words and his teaching to our heart, it goes beyond that.

His offer is to join our lives with his; not just in a spiritual sense, but in a corporeal, flesh and blood way. Here we're confronted with the complex mystery of the flesh and blood of Jesus found in the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic meal our lives are conjoined with Christ's, so that his life lives in us, as the very food and drink that fuels and makes us. This is a sacramental experience, a doorway, a portal or gate through which we enter into the very life of God. Christ is present - physically, lovingly, present in the bread and wine. Just as he lived in the flesh, and gave his life for us, and was resurrected in the flesh, he gives us his very body and blood as we partake in communion; and we give our lives to be joined with him. Christ comes to us, lives

in us, possesses us – and we, in turn, possess Christ, in fullness and abundance.

Too often we can get hung up on the nature of the transformation in the Eucharist; or hung up on what it is that happens to the bread and wine, as if it can be neatly explained. Throughout the history of the Church, as even now, battle lines are drawn up over the Eucharist. Jesus' words of him abiding in us and we in him, are hung, drawn and quartered as if this holy communion belongs to human hands and can be tamed or contained by words. We, from whichever tradition we sit with, can forget that it's not just about the bread and the wine – God is present and is transforming us. We, by partaking in the Holy Mysteries of the Eucharist, are changed. We must be. Listen again to the words we heard from John's Gospel: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide, live, make their home in me, and I live in them." This cannot just be about memorial words and actions. The Eucharist is serious business - a meeting place of God and humanity, and can never be taken lightly.

I am aware, as I celebrate the Eucharist, of the immense mystery and transforming power of this Sacrament, something that goes beyond the neat categories and limitations of human knowledge and actions. And I am aware of the enormous privilege and responsibility and joy that comes with presiding over the liturgy and serving at the altar as priest.

The invitation for all of us today is to sink our teeth deeper into what God is offering us, to be intentional and deliberate in our feeding on Christ. This is more than just sipping or nibbling or remembering. God is offering us his very self to chew and swallow, in the Eucharist and in life itself. This is Jesus giving himself to us totally. We're being called to consume Christ fully; we're being called into a relationship and a commitment so deep and intimate that only feeding on Jesus can express and satisfy it.

As you come forward to receive the Sacrament today, will you take, eat, thoroughly chew on and consume the body of Christ given for you?