

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity (Evensong)

John 6: 51 – 69

When you're reading a book, perhaps a detective story, I wonder whether you're the sort of person who reads the last few pages before you start the rest of the book. Now, is that a sensible thing to do? There's no right or wrong answer. Some people think it's good to know how all the plot is resolved and then admire the technique with which it all leads towards that resolution; others think it ruins the whole point of the book if you're not trying to work out as the story unfolds what all the clues are leading to. I have to tell you that my wife is an assiduously committed member of the latter camp. If we're watching something on TV she announces about a quarter way into that she's worked it out, and then she writes it on a piece of paper so we can check at the end whether she was right. And she always is right!

The writers of the gospels had no such luxury. The gospels are not journals that were kept contemporaneously as the events recorded in them unfolded; and were then published once Jesus had died and risen. In terms of when they were committed to writing, the gospels are the last books to be written in the Bible. They were written decades after the events occurred.

The gospel we've heard from this evening, the one we call St. John's gospel might have been committed to writing as late as 120AD. That's at least three generations after the events it's describing. So when the writers did commit it to writing, they couldn't help but be influenced by everything they already knew, not just about what happens in the story, but also by all the theological reflection that had already gone on about the significance of the events in the story; and furthermore by the religious rituals which had developed to memorialise the events in the story. And

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they couldn't help but write the story in a way that was influenced by all that knowledge.

So when we read John chapter 6 and we read "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" and we think that sounds like a reference to Holy Communion; it sounds like we're being encouraged to find nourishment for our discipleship by receiving Holy Communion; but then we think that that can't be right because there was no such thing as Holy Communion when Jesus was alive, so he can't have been talking about it; in actual fact our first instinct is correct: it's an anachronism. We do find placed on the lips of Jesus an encouragement to be nourished by the established ritual of Holy Communion.

But it is just as well also to take the story at face value and to ask ourselves what the story might say to us if we exclude the possibility that the words of Jesus refer to Holy Communion. And that's because it might be

good for us to be weaned off Communion a bit. The Church of England has never been as sacramental as it has been for the last 50 years or so. People of my generation, and perhaps the generation before it, tend to feel that we haven't been to a proper service if we haven't received Communion. Services like this are just a bit of icing on the cake. The substance of worship is Eucharist.

But the traditional main stays of Anglican Worship have always been Matins and Evensong. So big it up for Evensong! It's only since the Parish Communion Movement began in the 1950s and really took hold in the 1970s that the principal service has been a communion. And as ordained ministers get thinner on the ground it could be a good idea to revive services like this rather more; to have services at which it's not actually necessary for an ordained person to be present and at which we metaphorically "eat and drink Jesus" by reciting scripture, by hearing scripture proclaimed and by reflecting together upon it.

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There is just one, completely unrelated matter, which this passage invited us to address and which I feel cannot be left ignored on this, the 15th anniversary of the events of 9/11. People, in this story we're reading tonight, said they found dealing with Jesus all a bit difficult, a bit confounding and started to throw the towel in. And when Jesus asked the disciples whether they wanted to throw the towel in as well, Peter responded "Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life."

It seems to me, at first sight, a plausible and attractive argument to say, when we see all this intractable religious violence surrounding us, that if we just eliminated the religion there would be nothing to be violent about. If there were no religion there would have been no Crusades, no Inquisition, no Troubles in Ireland and no IS today, and the Twin Towers would not have fallen 15 years ago. So perhaps in all conscience the best thing to do is for us to throw the towel in.

The problem is that the premise of that argument is false. Religion does not create violence. It's worth noting that the attempts to eliminate religion in the C20th in Nazi Germany and the USSR have probably led to more people being killed than in the so-called religious wars of all the previous centuries put together.

But, more importantly, we do just need briefly to look at what does cause violence. It's a four stage process. First of all we define our identity by being part of a group. We are people who are like us. Secondly we reinforce that identity over and against other groups of people who are not like us. Thirdly we project onto that dualism the values that we are good and they are bad. Then finally we scapegoat the other group by blaming them for everything that goes wrong and take it out on them with violence.

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Religion offers us the resource with which to be released from that cycle by encouraging us to identify with others, to relinquish power and to reject hate.¹

The response to religious violence should not be to eliminate the religion, but to have better religion. For those of us pursuing religion through the traditions of the Christian faith that means eating and drinking more Jesus . . . in whatever way we choose to do that.

Amen.

¹ Jonathan Sacks [2015] Not in God's Name (reduced to one paragraph!)