

Harvest Festival 2019 Evening (15.09.19)

Isaiah 60; John 6: 51 – 69

Today we are celebrating Harvest Festival. The New Testament readings both for this morning and this evening are remarkably similar. In fact they both come from the same passage in John's Gospel. This morning we heard Jesus say "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." This evening's Gospel reading begins just a few verses further on and Jesus says "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." There's not much difference but what Jesus is doing is developing his theme.

I wasn't here this morning – I was taking a service in Wold Newton – but I'm quite sure that we concentrated on the providential way that there is, at

least theoretically, a sustainable amount of food for everybody. And that theory becomes reality when everybody cooperates with God, compelled by their faith in Jesus to distribute that provision equitably.

By the time we get to this evening we're moving away from thanksgiving for the physical provision of food and the ethics of food security; and we're moving on to an assessment of the very essence of what it is to have faith in Jesus.

Our problem is that this passage can be read in at least two different ways, each of which is partisan. On the one hand Jesus says "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me." If you want to bang a sacramental drum you can use that text and say this shows that to be a proper Christian you have to participate in the sacramental practices of the church and, to put it even more strongly, it is receiving the sacraments that makes you a Christian.

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Now, if you're very protestant you won't like that. It's the church – the human institution that is the church – that controls the sacraments, so if you need the sacraments to be a Christian, it must mean that the church polices salvation. And that's a red rag to any protestant bull. Combatting the conceit summarised in the Latin phrase “Extra ecclesiam nulla salus” was one of the driving forces of the Reformation. The protestant cry is “We're justified by faith alone.”

And if the drum you want to bang is that protestant drum, there's a proof text in this evening's Gospel reading for you too. We've just heard it proclaimed that Jesus says “It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” And we've also just heard words attributed to Peter that Jesus has the words of eternal life. So, if the passage is used in this way, it seems to provide ammunition for the partisan claims of the ultra-catholic and the staunch protestant alike.

If we look to the Church Fathers to see whether the way the passage has been handled in Church Tradition can help us read it, we don't really get much of a steer. It's been used to promote sacramentalism and it's been used to attack it.

It seems to me that the way out of this conundrum is not by deciding whether one side is right and the other is wrong, but by recognising that both sides are misusing – and I might even go as far as to say abusing – the Bible. The Bible doesn't provide us with proof texts to lob at each other. And there's nothing mutually exclusive about exhorting people to faith and encouraging them to participate in the sacraments.

It's not as if the sacraments are a conjuring trick done with a bit of bread and wine by a priest with magic hands. The bread and the wine only become for us the body and the blood of Christ because of the faith with which they are invested. They are more than mere

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symbols because they are transformed through faith to have a real significance.

And the point about this passage about which everybody can agree is that, for John's Gospel, believing in Jesus is more than a question of intellectual assent. We're not merely being invited to be fans of Jesus. We're not merely being invited to vote for Jesus or to like his Facebook page or to tick a box so that now and again we'll receive emails about the type of thing he gets up to.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, participates in the life of God the Father. And believing in him is about participating in the life of God the Father as well. It's about being incorporated into God; it's about appreciating Jesus ascending into God; it's about having a participative relationship with God. And that relationship is nourishing, whether that nourishment is apprehended through the sacraments or not.

Believing in Jesus is about being nourished by him; and through nourishment we grow; and when we grow we change into something different. That can be scary. 'Twas always thus. We're told that even the crowds following Jesus found it a challenge they weren't up for. They simply turned back and no longer went round with him.

Well, there's a possibility. But I hope that the words of Peter resonate for us: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Amne.