

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 12 WEEK 20 YEAR B 19 AUGUST 2018

You may not realise it, but I am in favour of simple language. Long or obscure words can make communication difficult. Oops! ‘Communication’ has five syllables. Let’s say ‘difficult to understand’ – that’s only three syllables. However, every area of human activity develops its own vocabulary, which is useful when people get to know the terms. Think of cricket, for example. “He’s fielding at gully,” is a useful statement if you know what ‘gully’ means – the commentator doesn’t have to give a lengthy explanation of whereabouts the fielder is standing.

The church has its own vocabulary. Our service sheets use the word ‘liturgy’. How many of us know what it means? How many people coming for a baptism have met the word before? It means, literally, ‘what people do’. It’s related to two more familiar words: ‘laity’, which means people, and ‘energy’, which is about doing things. OK, liturgy has a ‘u’ and energy has an ‘e’, but what’s a vowel between friends?

So, in the *Liturgy of the Word*, what people are doing is hearing scripture and its explanation in the sermon. In the *Liturgy of the Sacrament*, sometimes called the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, people are offering, blessing and receiving bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. Sacrament and Eucharist are two other words that need explaining from time to time.

The account of the journey to Emmaus near the end of S. Luke’s gospel has the shape of liturgy of the word followed by liturgy of the sacrament. The two disciples are joined on the road by the risen Christ, whom they do not recognise. He explains the scriptures to them. Then, in the house, he breaks the bread and they recognise him. First the word, the teaching; then the sacrament, the sign of Christ’s presence.

There’s a similar structure to the sixth chapter of S. John’s gospel. Today is the fourth of five Sundays on which we’re reading through it. It’s about Jesus declaring he is the bread of life, starting with the feeding of the five thousand, and then speaking to the crowd who respond from time to time. Last week and the week before Jesus has been telling the crowd he is the bread of life in the sense that following him should be fundamental to their lives. He is God’s message, God’s word to them. He reveals the Father. He and the crowd refer to the scriptures, particularly to the account of Moses and the manna in the wilderness. This is the liturgy of the word. Today’s reading corresponds to the liturgy of the sacrament. Four times Jesus refers to eating his flesh and drinking his blood – clearly the eucharist is in mind.

Last week I discussed how revolutionary Jesus' message was. He was telling his hearers that following him, rather than observing the law of Moses, was the way to know the Father. Today's gospel is just as revolutionary in terms of how they should worship. In verse 4 of the chapter we are told it is Passover time – the annual observance of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt, when families killed, cooked and ate a lamb. But animal sacrifices are now replaced, in the first instance by Jesus' own death on the cross, and subsequently by the offering of the eucharist, in which Christians eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, the lamb of God. Jesus' language is very realistic, even graphic. He actually uses two different words which our English bibles translate as 'eat'. One of those words has the sense of 'chew'. "Whoever chews my flesh..." – it takes us aback. No wonder his hearers found it difficult to accept, and we'll hear more about that next week.

There's no basis in this passage for over-spiritualising the eucharist, nor for ascribing magical powers to the flesh and blood – keep vampires away sort of thing.* The meaning is more straightforward, but no less miraculous. Christ becomes part of our life just as what we eat and drink becomes part of us. With this understanding, participating in the eucharist brings us into the life of God. Jesus says, "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." In the perspective of eternity, present and future are joined together: "Those who eat my flesh and blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day." Indeed we could add the past, because the eucharist is founded on the death and resurrection of Christ.

So when we come to church on a Sunday morning, or at other times during the week, we should be aware of the momentous work, the liturgy, which we celebrate. We are offering ourselves to be fed by God, to receive his life in the way his Son commanded and taught us. And we do all we can to enable all, especially those seeking the truth, to understand the life changing event present in our midst.

*[Jesus is speaking from a Jewish background in which a person is regarded as a whole being. Separating out body, mind and spirit, comes more from the various Greek philosophies of the time. That's why we declare, in the creed, the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body: heaven is not disembodied spirits absorbed into a vast ocean of being.]