

SERMON, 22 AUGUST 2021

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” – we’ve been working through John chapter 6 the last few weeks, the importance of Jesus as the centre of our faith, the importance of the Eucharist, the bread and the wine we share together.

I come from a church tradition where communion was something that happened just once a month – where preaching of the word was so much more important than sharing the sacrament, indeed my Baptist chapel would never use the word “sacrament”. I then went to Selwyn College in Cambridge where there was a daily Eucharist – and on one hand that seemed decidedly different, on the other hand, when I went to the early morning service, I found a haven a peace and a special spiritual experience.

For many centuries, even in an Anglican church like ours, communion was something that happened rarely – once or twice a year, a special service. It was only in the 1950s and 60s that the Parish Communion made the Eucharist the main service every Sunday – theologically they would use John 6, this passage, as their reasoning - “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” – practically, they were trying to stop the decrease in numbers. In my last church, in Ponteland, they moved the altar from the east end of the Chancel down into the middle of the church – a Nave altar and, for a few years, they had a large congregation that would sit in all the areas of the church – nave, north transept, chancel, south transept – with Communion being celebrated in their midst. For a few years that worked, but numbers continued to decline, and – well before my time – it was rare you had anyone left sitting in the Chancel. Only at Christmas and Easter – or if we had a big baptism party (we used to do the baptisms in the main Sunday services) – was the Chancel ever full.

But as time went on, even before the pandemic, with fewer and fewer parish clergy, and each cleric having more churches, there are fewer communion services in each church. Some churches have tried to bring people together in one service – first Sunday of the month in village A, second in village B, third in village C, fourth in village D. We only have two churches so our plan is simpler – but when, Easter Sunday, Christmas morning, we want two communions, there’s only one of me – and not as many retired clergy as there were.

The pandemic changed all of that. For several months none of us, me included, had communion. I missed it – I believe you did too. As we’ve reopened, we are not back to normal. We have not restarted 8 o’clock, and I don’t think we ever

will – and all the 8 o'clockers have transferred to 10, either on a Sunday or a Wednesday. I am very grateful to them. The 11.15 service hasn't restarted, and probably won't – the choir have moved to 10, and we're now Zooming at 11.30. I'm sorry that there will be a handful of people who will really miss that service, but we can't do everything.

I am sorry that some of our pre-pandemic congregation have not returned to regular worship. Some have transferred to the zoom service, indeed some are more regular on zoom than there were in the church building – and that's great. We are taking the church out of the building, making worship possible for those for whom age and infirmity (or the presence of a new born baby) mean that 10 am in church is difficult – so we need the support of all of you for that service. I am still producing written material Sunday by Sunday for those who struggle to get to a building, or struggle to zoom – and I will keep doing that as long as is required. I am also very happy to come and bring people the sacrament, to do a home communion – but they need to ask. We will do our best to bring people into worship, in all sorts of different ways – but people are adults. I am sad that some of them have decided church worship is no longer an important part of their life – but that is a decision that they are free to make.

One positive – before the pandemic, when we had the Service of the Word, which Julie, Carol and Terry worked extremely hard to produce, you could be pretty sure that they would have a congregation about 20% smaller than it was when I came and took Communion. Now our Sunday congregations are about the same, whatever service it is. It pleases my wife when she gets more than I do – and I shall rejoice with her (through gritted teeth!).

I've used half of my sermon to think raise some thoughts about the sort of services we have – but when Jesus said "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" I don't suppose the practicalities of church life in the 21st century were really on his mind. Much, much more important – what does Jesus mean to us. Of course communion, kneeling to receive the bread and the wine, the symbols of his body and his blood, of course that is important to those of us who are part of this tradition – but that is only part of it. (It's always worth reminding ourselves that one of the most spiritual Christian traditions – the Quakers – and one of the most practical Christian traditions – the Salvation Army – do not have a place for communion in their theology).

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" – we need Jesus to abide in us, and we need to abide in him. Prayer, reading the Scripture, seeking to live as his people in the world, loving and supporting each other, being his people in this world – loving and supporting those outside these four walls, outside this community – being Christ in this world.

And “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” – that was the response to Jesus himself by many of those who had been listening to him. This is not people turning away from church, people turning their back on an institution, this is people turning their backs on the man himself. The miracle worker, the teacher, the preacher – the one who can feed them with loaves and fish – but when he talks about his departure, when he tries and commission them to be his people in the world, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Jesus, we want you to drive the Romans out, we want you to transform our country, we want you to transform our religion – O, you want us to do it ourselves, to be your people, O “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

Watching the News this week, I struggle to cope with the belief that there is a God, a God in charge, a God of love. I watch Afghan parents passing their children, their babies, over the heads of the crowds in the desperate hope that they might be saved – and I cry to God and ask where he is in the mess. I see leadership so incompetent that it is lying on a beach, or so hateful that (even though their parents came to this country as refugees) they will turn these refugees away – where is Christian love and action? Jo Biden, a President whose election I rejoiced in – the evil of Trump had been defeated – Jo Biden talks about the importance of “American lives” – sorry, Mr President, the God I thought we both worshipped, does not distinguish between American lives and Afghan, we are all made in the image of God.

It is hard being a Christian in the 21st century, as it is in any century. The power of evil is very great, humans do not easily do what is good – it’s called sin. It’s why Paul’s writes about armour – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit. Paul was probably writing his letter while he was under house arrest. He knew what the likely outcome of his faith was – that he would be seen as a danger to the State, that his future was not going to be easy. He may well have had a Roman soldier on guard. Many years ago I got a Roman re-enactor to come to a bible study evening when we looked at this passage. He told us about his armour, showed it, explained it, showed us how hard sharp the sword actually was – and then stood on guard while Julie read this passage. It was sobering to listen and watch.

We are here for a purpose. Yesterday’s wedding was a bit of a performance – the church as venue. But it gave an opportunity to speak to 120 people about God, love, heritage, our need to follow Christ, and to build a better world. It gave an opportunity to pray for Max and Helen, and their guests, and their families and friends. Who knows where that might lead.

We are all of us here for a purpose, God is working through us. I don't know what this week holds for you, I don't know who you'll meet, where life will take you – but I do know that the world will be a better place because of you and your faith and your prayers.

Simon Peter said to Jesus, “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.”

We can say the same – and we are God's people in this world.