

St Marc Grenoble
Sunday 15th August 2021 (Trinity 11)
Ephesians 5: 15 - 20
John 6: 51 - 58
'Living Bread, Flesh and Blood'

Good morning, everyone - here in Church, and those joining us on Zoom.

PRAY

I wonder if any of you bake your own bread, or ever have done? Isn't the smell of baking bread one of the finest smells there is?

When we lived in England, Julia had a bread machine, which baked bread overnight. It was delightful to wake up in the morning with the smell of baking bread pervading the house - it was like waking up in a warm glow!

And, of course, warm crusty bread is simply delicious to eat - just like the baguettes from the boulangerie across the road.

Bread is one of our staple foods, and since before the time when the Israelites were wandering the desert, its availability has always been an assurance of the ability to stay alive.

In 2001, on the morning after the Twin Towers disaster in New York, I heard a radio presenter in England, reading an e-mail from a friend of his, in New York, reflecting on the awful events of the previous day. I still remember it; she said: "It was eerie seeing thousands of people walking up all the avenues, North, away from the scene. I went to the supermarket and got into a long line, and there wasn't a single slice of bread."

Not surprisingly, when the people of the city were in panic, the first thing they tried to do was to buy bread. It was a way of reassuring themselves that they could stay alive.

Today's reading from John 6 tells us Jesus said: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live forever."

This claim from Jesus was part of His response to a demand from the Judean crowd, earlier in the chapter: "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"

Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus pointed out to them that it was God, not Moses, who gave their ancestors the manna to eat: but it was only like ordinary food, to fill their bellies, and sustain short-term human life.

He contrasts it - with the 'Living Bread', which enables those who eat it to 'live forever'.

He says: "If anyone eats from this bread, they will live forever. And the bread which I shall give is my flesh, given for the life of the world."

Later we read

"Anyone who feasts upon my flesh and drinks my blood has the life of God's coming age, and I will raise them up at the last day."

Again, He says:

"My flesh is true food, you see, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I remain in them".

But, to make matters worse, the original word in v. 54 doesn't just mean 'eat' – it has connotations of eating noisily, crunching, relishing – in effect, really 'making a real meal of it'!

This was really offensive to the Jewish people because their food laws specifically prohibit the from eating either blood, or human flesh.

Twice in this passage, Jesus says He came down from heaven – a clear claim that He is God.

Nothing could have been more offensive to the Jewish people and, as we see, this entire response threw them into complete turmoil.

They simply didn't understand what on earth He was on about; we're told in the verses after our reading today: On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is difficult stuff. Who can bear to listen to it?"

Jesus responded:

Jesus knew that his disciples were grumbling about what he'd said. 'Does this put you off?' he said. 'What if you were to see the son of man ascending to where he was before? It's the spirit that gives life; the flesh is no help. The words that I have spoken to you – they are spirit, they are life.

But there are some of you who don't believe.' In effect – If this offends you, you ain't seen nothing yet!

Well, of course it did offend them; and we're told it was then that many people,

who had been following Him up to this point, could not take any more from this 'extremist', and left.

Jesus then asked His twelve closest disciples if they wanted to leave too.

In response we hear, from Peter, what is one of the simplest, strongest and most beautiful affirmations of faith in the New Testament:

"Master, who can we go to? You're the one who's got the words of the life of the coming age! We've come to know it! - that you are God's Holy One."

Peter, at least, had grasped what Jesus was saying, it's the Holy Spirit who gives eternal life – the flesh is transient and counts for nothing in eternity.

So, what was Jesus talking about, and what does it all mean to us?

I know that many people, possibly you, and certainly me, when we hear of some of the disasters in the world, ask "What can sustain our fragile lives here on this earth? What can give us the strength to carry on, in the face of all the evil, bitterness and hatred, which are so evident in our world?"

Well, I believe the answer is right here in our reading. Let's try and uncover exactly what Jesus means.

When Jesus refers to eating, or making a meal of, His flesh and blood, He is using a graphic word picture – a way of saying that, if we want eternal life, we must receive Him into our innermost being.

We must allow our lives to be pervaded by Jesus – in the same way as the wonderful smell of baking bread pervades the whole house.

The tense of the verbs 'eating' and 'drinking', in the original language, suggests once for all actions – equivalent to the once for all act of receiving Jesus into our life.

His allusion to flesh and blood - separately, are a suggestion of death – His own death – in atonement, or payment, for our sins.

Jesus knew that He would have to die to pay the redemptive price for those who believe in Him to come into the Father's presence.

Jesus tells us that He alone has direct access to the Father. So it is only through Him we can receive eternal life.

But, what is this eternal life?

How can Jesus say we'll live for ever, when we know only too well that human life comes to an end, often when we least expect it?

Eternal life is access to the presence of God, the Father, and the joy of being able to live for eternity face to face with God.

It is only Jesus who can take us into the Father's presence.

We see that for many who heard what Jesus had to say, His claims were simply too tough to swallow. And, that's still true, for many people, today.

But, in that dramatic moment, when Jesus asked the twelve if they wanted to leave too – Peter answered, in a threefold confession of faith. What he said in today's language was: "Lord, where else can we go? You alone offer eternal life; and, we believe and know that you are God's holy one."

So, now, we have to make that choice too.

Are we with Peter and the twelve? Or, are we with those who turn away?

Are we prepared to accept God's grace and receive Jesus into our innermost being? Or, do we find all this simply too tough to swallow?

Are we prepared to be lifted up, with Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and accept the promise of eternal life?

Or, will we keep our feet firmly on the ground, like those who turned away?

We all have to make the choice. I must choose. You must choose.

We need to do it now; because we simply never know when, or how, this transient human life will cease. It's almost always, sooner than we expect.

And so now, as I pray, please feel free to add your signature with the 'Amen'.

"Father God, please give me the gift of Your grace, to be able to accept The Living Bread; and through the Holy Spirit to receive Jesus into my innermost being, so that I may spend eternal life with you." Amen