

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Joshua 24. 1-2a, 14-18

Ephesians 6. 10-20

John 6. 56-69

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

As I begin my talk this morning, I'd like to ask you a question: 'What is your favourite food?' Those of you who know me well know that I absolutely love chocolate; and I can't go to Waitrose without being tempted to buy these amazing chocolate biscuits. These biscuits make me think of that famous television series, entitled 'You are what you eat', which played on Channel Four between 2004 and 2007. Did any of you watch it? The show often used shock tactics to get its participants to lose weight. In each episode, all the food that had been consumed in one week by the persons taking part was placed on a table to highlight the problem areas of their diet. The series became a sensation overnight, with viewers watching others be humiliated from the comfort of their armchairs whilst munching on a bar of chocolate. Amazingly, the participants all lost huge amounts of weight by changing their diets drastically. The presenter Gillian McKeith seemed to prove her point – 'You are what you eat'.

Our appointed gospel reading opens with a profound teaching that our Lord gave the great crowd of people who had been following him since he fed the five thousand: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.' Many of Jesus's disciples found this too difficult to hear, even though he had revealed to them that he was speaking about something far greater than nourishment of the human body. 'It is the spirit that gives life' said Christ, 'the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.' Our Lord, who is the creative Word of God, had journeyed with these people and had revealed to them God's presence and the Father's love.

As we have seen in our studies of chapter six of St John's gospel over the past few weeks, Jesus seized the opportunity to reveal the mystery and depth of his relationship with his followers, starting with the feeding of the five thousand, and then by reflecting on the great journey of the Exodus, when God fed his people in the desert. By his miraculous actions and by his profound words, Jesus attempted to help his followers grow in their understanding.

But their understanding was short-lived. When it came to the crunch, to taking the step of faith, of commitment and of trust; and when it came to recognising the presence of God in Christ, many of his disciples 'turned back and no longer went about with him'. In what I find to be one of the saddest moments in the gospels, our Lord turned to the Twelve, his closest followers, and asked them: 'Do you also wish to go away?' And for once, Simon Peter spoke from the heart, beautiful words that must have encouraged Jesus: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

Some time later, sitting with Christ at the Last Supper, Peter also heard these words: 'Take, eat; this is my body'...(and then, when our Lord took a cup)... 'Drink from it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Mt 26. 26-28). Clearly, this affected the early Church in a powerful way; for someone (was it Peter?) told Paul (who then recounted in his letter to the Corinthian Church), 'For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed...;' and then Paul recalled the Last Supper in exact detail, before saying, 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (I Cor 11. 23-26)

From the earliest moments of the infant Church, there was a belief that the Lord's Supper was more than just a meal; it was a means of proclaiming the Lord's death and *becoming part of him*. 'Abide in me', said Jesus. The early followers of 'The Way'

were to be united not only with each other, but also with Christ himself: ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?’ says Paul, ‘Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.’ (I Cor 10. 16-17)

‘You are what you eat.’

When we participate in the Eucharist, we become our Lord’s mystical body here on earth. Now this is not just a nice cosy thing to do. It is not the same as a birthday party or an anniversary meal; sharing in Holy Communion *changes things*.

It was Henri Nouwen who wrote, ‘The Eucharist is the sacrament by which we become one body. Becoming one body is not becoming a team, or a group, or even a fellowship. Becoming one body is becoming the *Body of Christ*. It is becoming the living Lord, visibly present in the world.’¹

My dear friends, St Stephen’s is a church that celebrates the Mass on average five times a week. The Mass is part of our identity; it is what part of what makes St Stephen’s Church tick. We celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays, Feast days and weekdays as beautifully, even as sumptuously as possible. Why? Why do we do this? Because we follow the command of the Lord: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’.

‘Remembrance’, however, is not simply about memory. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are not simply turning over the leaves of a photograph album. The narrative of the Eucharistic prayer is not simply a re-telling of the sacred story, but an articulation of the desire and the expectation that the saving effect of those past events may impinge, *here and now*, on those who have assembled to worship.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (New York : Harper Collins, 1996), p. 319.

In the Eucharist, we who participate actually enter into the Paschal mystery. We remember (that is, 're-member') Jesus and we become part of him. The word (*anamnesis*) is about connecting the past with the present and looking into the future. That is why the contemporary Eucharistic Prayers of the Church have the acclamation: 'Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.'

This 'remembrancing' of Christ is not simply symbolic, either. The eucharistic gifts are symbols of transformation in a double sense. Firstly, in so far as they are transformed from ordinary food and drink into the Body and Blood of Christ; and secondly, because of the expectation that those who receive the sacred gifts will *themselves be changed*, transformed from being a mere group of individuals to being the Body of Christ and a symbol of God's coming kingdom.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.' He also said, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.'

We are what we eat.

Amen.