

Sermon Trinity 12 – John 6:53-69

Before I moved to Geddington, I was at a parish in the Black Country – A place called Sedgley, which joined Wolverhampton to Dudley. It was a large urban area that had numerous churches. In the centre of the town, on the high street, sat a very large Baptist church. It had huge glass doors, which would be open during the summer months. They had a lovely minister called John. He would regularly invite newcomers to come to the front and declare their faith and be baptised in their large baptismal pool.

One day, as John was calling out asking if anyone wished to come up to declare their faith in Jesus Christ, a local homeless gentleman, named Jimmy, was walking past the doors. As Jimmy heard John calling out, he thought to himself, why not, that sounds like a good crack.

So Jimmy walked in. John was over the moon. ‘Jimmy’, he said, ‘How wonderful. We have been praying for years that you might come to faith. Come forward, Jimmy, and be baptised’. Jimmy and John entered the baptismal pool together. John dunked Jimmy under and shouted, ‘Jimmy, have you seen the Lord?’

‘Nope’, Jimmy replied.

John, a little concerned, dunked him under a second time, ‘Jimmy, have you found Jesus?’

‘Nope’, Jimmy replied.

Now John is feeling quite annoyed. He held Jimmy under a third time, but this time poor Jimmy was turning blue before John eventually pulled him out. ‘Jimmy’, John cried, one final time, ‘Have you seen the Lord Jesus Christ?’

‘Nope’, Jimmy replied, ‘are you sure this is where he fell in?’

Imagine the scene. It must have been an amazing sight when Jesus fed all those people on the hillside. One minute thousands are hungry, the next there are buckets full of food with left overs enough to feed a household – all from five loaves and two fishes.¹ The miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand must be one of the most inspiring of all the miracles. It offers a challenging blueprint for our own lives, especially in a world that is so wasteful, where there is such a gulf between rich and poor.

Today’s reading from John follows directly on from this miraculous story, and you can’t fully grasp today’s reading without first thinking a little about the feeding of the five thousand. As we do so, we realise that, as is so often the case with Jesus’ miracles, not everything is what it seems. Even Jesus’ physical acts carry with them spiritual meaning. For what good is it if you save the body yet lose the soul?

The feeding of the five thousand is not just about bodily sustenance. It is also about providing a physical example on which to hang much deeper teaching.

¹ John 6:1-15

What are these people really hungry for? Why have they followed Jesus up the mountainside without provisions? What is it they really need? Jesus - the 'Word made flesh' – the one who shows us the Father in Heaven, who connects us to each other and makes us participants in the divine life.

It is not uncommon for us to confuse the thing with the person, the symptom with the problem, the want for the need. Those that are fed one day on a mountainside, soon come back looking for more and so Jesus reveals to them with his true identity. With it comes the opportunity for a different life, if they choose to participate in it.

Those of us who claim Christ as our Lord, those of us who are committed to his Body on earth, his Church, those of us, then, who call ourselves Christians, find ourselves being fed by Christ's own presence, and it is in that feeding that we are participants in the divine life. God reaching out to us, providing a way for grace in our lives, opening internal doors for the holy to live within us and among us: again and again and again. We are the five thousand, returning having been fed at the hands of our saviour, and each time we do, the reality of what God wishes to do with us becomes more and more obvious.

No longer is it acceptable for us to bear a grudge. No more can we allow small issues to be blown out of all proportion and insist on our own way. No more can we build a God in our own image out of the bits and pieces that appeal to us and leave the more challenging stuff behind just because we don't like it. Ladies and Gentlemen, heaven is a challenge. The holy is the comforter, but as such he makes the unhelpful bits of us feel uncomfortable so that they may be healed. He is the healer who confronts the parts of us that we don't always want to face up to.

This is not what we are used to, it is not commercialism, or material objects that we can possess or manipulate to our own end. He is not interested in a fair-weather relationship: a friend that we choose to be near when he is speaking words that make us feel good about ourselves, and then drop the second he speaks a truth we don't want to hear. The holy is not made of earth but of heaven and that means we need to learn to live more according to heavenly values and less dominated by worldly ones. That means that we must be willing to change, be willing to commit, be willing to bring piece, to be willing to grow, be willing to allow the bread of heaven to transform us so that our own wilfulness no longer dominates who we are, but instead simply a longing for the thriving of God's people. The bread we share must transform us into Christ's body, united, open to each other, open to generously sharing everything we have, a positive image of the good Christ brings to our world.

Eating assumes that we are hungry, that we are in need of sustenance. Part of the challenge of the Christian life is our recognition of our dependence and interdependence. We are always dependent upon God and each other. We cannot run away and hope to remain healthy. We cannot turn our back on the people God has called us to serve. We need to recognise that in the eating we are accepting our own dependence upon God. We need to recognise that in the eating and drinking we are able to experience a piece of God's very self. Not a false image of God that we have developed in our living room through our televisions or on our computer screens, but the real God who has been revealed through the Church for centuries and made present in our heavenly meal, sharing bread and wine.

Part of the challenge is to recognise that there are many around us, even close friends, who go about each day, every day without the spiritual sustenance they need – just as there are so many in our modern society who do not have their physical needs met. Just like a person who will become malnourished without the right food, there are so many in our society who suffer from spiritual starvation, whether self-imposed or otherwise. Jesus says 'I am the living bread, open your eyes and see the light'.

The community that we call the Church is at its core a community who hunger. We are a community of people called around a table to be fed week by week. Our identity is rooted in what it means to be sustained by the presence of Christ every time we come together. A presence that is both comforting and challenging, that both reassures and chides. A God who was willing to die on a cross so that we may have eternal life. A presence that, if we take it seriously, forces us to keep searching and coming back ever more frequently to meet our God in his Holy meal.

It is for this reason that Jesus says to them and to us, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you."²

Amen

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² John 6:53