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Becoming Who You Are (John 6. 51-58)

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It is lovely to be with you again this evening. Last week we looked at the Transfiguration as a type of liminal or epiphany narrative where the veil is lifted and we are offered 'a glimpse of how things really are'.¹ In such experiences something previously hidden is revealed for what it is – at least for those who have eyes to see and who are willing to turn aside and allow themselves to be addressed. Some of you have let me know that you enjoyed my use of poetry in that reflection. I was reminded that, in a former incarnation, sharing a poem with my students often felt like breaking bread with them.

The 19th century poet, Emily Dickinson, suggests that poetry is a way of telling the truth but telling it 'slant'. 'Success in Circuit lies', she says. 'The truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind.'² Too much too soon can be overwhelming. Perhaps that is why Jesus usually relied so much on parables and metaphor in his teachings. But in the Bread of Life Discourse from which tonight's reading comes, his modus operandi is very different. Or so it seems. Rather than telling it slant, he seems to be disconcertingly direct and didactic. And some of it lacks a lightness of touch. But if we look further, we see that he is still relying on, even insisting on, the use of metaphor and paradox to make his point. When the crowds follow him after the Feeding of the Five Thousand, either for another free meal or to be entertained by another 'stunt', Jesus challenges them: 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures' (Jn 6: 26-7). They then counter with, 'What sign are you going to give us then, that we may see it and believe you?' (v 30) The subtext: After all, Moses gave a daily supply of manna in the

¹ Malcolm Guite, 'Transfiguration'.

² Emily Dickinson, 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant'.

wilderness. Can you top that? Jesus tries to tell them that they are missing the point, that he is the true bread they are really seeking – if they only knew it – ‘the true bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’ (Jn 6: 33).

The Bread of Life Discourse – dramatised as a lively debate first between Jesus and those who are seeking him after the miracle, and later between Jesus and the Jewish authorities in the synagogue at Capernaum – is obviously didactic. It has its invitational, comforting moments, for example, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ (Jn 6: 35). At other times it is distinctly heavy going, even occasionally downright disturbing.

With the privilege of hindsight we automatically link the Bread of Life Discourse with the eucharist. The first audience of John’s gospel – around 90-110 CE – would also have been familiar with the eucharist ritual, but Jesus’ immediate audience would not for the simple reason that it hasn’t been instituted yet. No wonder then that even Jesus’ disciples find this teaching difficult and many of them question, ‘Who can accept it?’ (Jn 6: 60) Later in the chapter we hear how some previous disciples turn away (v.66), apparently finding this teaching too much to swallow, if you will pardon the pun.

Let’s revisit tonight’s reading:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’ The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat? So Jesus says to them, ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’ (Jn 6: 51-56).

So how then do we in the 21st century hear this reading? Four times Jesus repeats the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Has this been so sanitised for us by its association with the Eucharist that we don't notice how disturbing, the imagery is? At least it grabs our attention. Or it should. What is he trying to teach us here?

'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them' (v.56). These words remind us that what he is saying here can only be understood in light of the overarching imagery of mutual abiding, oneness and communion that are core themes of his final discourse to his disciples (chapters 14-17 of John's gospel). There is a paradox here though – where a mode of teaching that is more like a debate than an attempt at conciliation, and a violent image of rending and tearing apart, that is more alienating than inviting – become an invitation to reconciliation and wholeness. It is in Christ himself that the opposites of heaven and earth, life and death, flesh and spirit, darkness and light, time and eternity are reconciled, not by removing the tension between these opposites, but by carrying and transcending them. The union he speaks of in John's gospel does not mean the absence of difference and conflict but their integration and reconciliation which is only achieved through his death and resurrection.

Is Jesus also implying, 'Are you willing to drink this cup too?' Are you willing to follow this path?

Some people are disconcerted by the contrast between the way Jesus is portrayed in John's gospel and the way he is portrayed in the synoptic gospels. Between the more 'human', accessible Jesus of the synoptic gospels and the more remote, assured and challenging figure they see in John's gospel. How many of us have found comfort in Hebrews 4:15 which assures us that Jesus is able to understand us because he knows what it is to be human: 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' – only to wonder at times what to make of this other Jesus?

Alexander Shaia's attempt to reconcile these different faces of Jesus may be helpful. He reminds us that in the Prologue to John's gospel, Christ is presented 'as the overarching reality that existed eternally, and Jesus as an individual embodiment of that reality'. In that sense, Jesus came as a human manifestation of the Christ. Jesus was born. The Christ was not. Jesus died. The Christ did not.'³(p.167).³ He writes:

Jesus the Christ is a divine and unified reality that presents two faces to us: one that is loving and familiar and another that is vast and mysterious... Jesus and the Christ are expressions of a great and creative process which we are invited to enter and make our own.'⁴ (p.166-7)⁴

'Enter and make our own'. These welcoming words are an echo of the invitation to mutual indwelling referred to earlier and they apply to both Jesus and the Christ. For both Shaiah and Rohr a developmental process is involved. Rohr succinctly describes it as a move from the personal 'I' to the increasingly inclusive 'we'.⁵

Understanding the difference between the historical, familiar Jesus and the transcendent Christ can be important in our response to those passages where Jesus seems almost to be 'speaking out of character', as Richard Rohr puts it.⁶ This might help with the discomfort some of us may have felt at times with the 'I am' statements in John's gospel. It makes a difference if it is Jesus the Christ who is speaking rather than Jesus of Nazareth. Or perhaps our discomfort has been less about the sayings themselves, than the ways they have been weaponised to exclude rather than include. Perhaps the most notorious example of this is the familiar 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' (Jn 14:6) Yet there are other ways of interpreting this verse that fit better with Jesus' claim that he came to give life to the world (Jn 6:33), not just the chosen few!

³ Alexander Shaia, 2010, *The Hidden Power of the Gospels*.

⁴ Op.cit.

⁵ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*.

⁶ Op. cit.

It is ironic that so much teaching about John's gospel has often overlooked its mystical and poetic vision – not to mention Jesus' own preference for metaphor and paradox which discourages easy certainty.

I began last week's talk with the story of how I had visited The Church of the Transfiguration in Israel and had participated in a eucharist which had followed a 4th Cent. Byzantine rite. When it came to receiving the communion, the priest said, 'Become what you receive.' And I responded, 'The Body of Christ'. I said that seemed to take me to the heart of a mystery that would probably take a lifetime to unpack.

I have called tonight's talk 'Becoming What You Receive' because that seems to be the point of the Bread of Life Discourse. Are we open to the daily bread that we are offered and to the cup we are given in the life that is ours to live? John O'Donohue has a wonderful phrase 'the eucharist of the ordinary'. He writes:

We seldom notice how each day is a holy place
Where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,
Transforming our fragments
Into an eternal continuity that keeps us.⁷

In a similar vein, Thomas Merton says:

Life is simple.
We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent
And God is showing through it all the time...
God shows Godself everywhere
In people and in things and in nature and events...
The only thing is that we don't see it.⁸

⁷ John O'Donohue, 2008, 'The Inner History of a Day', *Bless the Space Between Us*. I am grateful to Vivienne from Tasmania who brought it to our attention at meditation 13th August..

⁸ Can't find original source of this Merton quote but text can be found on web

As I said last week, poets help us to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, and contemplative practices like mindfulness, the examen (reflection on the day) and meditation increase our capacity to notice God's presence. I conclude with Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', as a way of gathering some of the themes we have touched on in these two reflections: that all life is sacrament – including ourselves – and that we are called to become who we are, to manifest 'that being indoors each one dwells'.

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

– Gerard Manley Hopkins⁹

May it be so.

⁹ Readily available on google