

For many of us today, we can recall holding down an important job. We've had to do the long hours, meet the deadlines, put the hard graft in. As many of you know I have never been one for doing the bare minimum when it comes to work or service. In my last job I would have put long hours in to ensure the programmes of work were delivered. And in my role as minister of this parish I definitely won't sit back and allow the place to tick over – I will invest in the time required. However there have been times for me, and I'm sure there have been for you, where you have stopped yourself and said to yourself "get a life". It's that moment where you realise that all the effort you are putting in seems worthless. I have to say I don't feel that as much now as I may have done in my last job. But I have had people come to me and say to me, "Jonny, get a life". In other words "stop putting all your energy into that thing you're doing. There's got to be more to life than this".

In John Chapter 6 Jesus talks about this issue of real life, or, as he calls it, 'eternal life'. He talks about what sustains life. And the references to food are very timely for the crowd around him as they are looking a quick meal off him. John tells us that when Jesus fed the five thousand people, they immediately thought of Moses giving their ancestors this supernatural bread in the desert, and they reminded Jesus of this. No, Jesus replied - Moses didn't give it to them, my Father did. And anyway, those who ate that bread all died eventually, but if you eat of the true bread of heaven, you will not die. He goes on to explain that he is the bread of life; all who come to him will never be hungry, and all who believe in him will never be thirsty.

So far so good, but in our gospel for today things get a little more confusing. Jesus says in verse 51, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh". Now this causes real division to those who are listening – in fact Jesus' words are truly offensive to them as they think about cannibalism – Jesus tells them to eat his flesh and to drink his blood.

We Christians, of course, have two thousand years of Communion services in our collective memory, so when we hear these words, we immediately think of the bread and wine of Holy Communion. The people who first heard these words from John's Gospel would have thought the same thing. But I'm going to suggest this morning that we slow down, and not go there right away. We need to ask ourselves, what would these words have sounded like to those who *first* heard them spoken? It's not surprising that a few verses later on we read that 'when many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (v.60) – and some of them left Jesus altogether.

So what does it really mean to eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood? And why would we want to do it anyway? What are the benefits that we receive from it?

Why would we want to eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood? What are the benefits we're promised from this? Well, we're told in verse 54 that 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life'. And we need to remind ourselves that the phrase 'eternal life' doesn't just mean 'life that goes on and on forever'. In a prayer to his Father in John 17:3 Jesus tells us what eternal life is: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent". To receive eternal life, then, is to be brought into a relationship with the living God and with his Son Jesus Christ. To put it bluntly: to know God is the only way to be truly alive. You see eternal life doesn't begin when you die. Eternal life begins right now as you enter into a proper relationship with Jesus Christ. In verse 56 Jesus declares that those who

eat his flesh and drink his blood abide in him. In other words they make their home in Jesus. Can you imagine such a thing – to make our home in Jesus, and for Jesus to make his home in us? That is exactly what Jesus was doing when he came as God Incarnate – he came to dwell with his people, but that is his desire right to today. For me when I sit with people in their hospital beds, I pray that God would draw very close to them. There cannot be a greater feeling of completeness in life when you know that God by his Spirit is dwelling in you each day.

But maybe not all of us feel that way. Maybe some of us can only think to ourselves, “I must be missing something here”. Maybe some of us have just started out on this Christian life and we haven’t yet really experienced the touch of God in any direct sort of way. Maybe, in fact, some of us have been attending church all our lives and have never really made any personal contact with God. How do we get that?

Jesus is quite direct about how we get it: he says we have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. But what does that mean? As I said, lifelong churchgoers are tempted to jump right away to the bread and wine of Holy Communion, but let’s not go there too fast. Instead, let’s go back to the first mention of the bread of life in John 6, in verse 35. Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”.

Apparently, in Judaism, there was a long history of seeing the Torah, the Old Testament law of God, as the true manna from heaven; it was said that God fed the people with the words of his mouth. So to listen to the Law or Instruction of God, to think about it and chew on it, and to put it into practice in your life, was seen as a way of receiving the true spiritual bread of life.

And that’s the interpretation I believe that Jesus is now following here in our reading. He wants our appetite our desire our longing to be all about him. That we drink into his Word, that we become so intimately close to him in every aspect of life,

How do we respond to that challenge to ‘come to Jesus’ and to ‘believe in him’? Well, if you understand the invitation that Jesus is giving you, the most eloquent prayer in the world could be the one simple word, ‘Yes’. Jesus is with us this morning and is giving us this invitation: ‘Will you come to me and believe in me? Will you put your life in my hands and let me lead you from this day forward?’ And if your heart is responding to that call, then there’s no need to worry about getting the words right; if all you can manage is the word ‘yes’, that will do just fine.

That’s a moment of commitment to Christ. So let’s come afresh to him – not just today at Holy Communion, but tomorrow as well, and the next day, and the day after that. Let’s put our trust in him, ask him to make himself known to us and to give us the strength to put his teaching and example into practice as we eat and drink it in our lives every day. The writer of the psalms says, ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him’ (Psalm 34:8). May that be your life’s aim and nothing else.