Sermon 22Aug2021 John 6 56-69

Over the last few weeks we have been focusing on being Church, being a koinonia-fellowship. This is the third in this series looking particularly at one of the key activities we do when we come together as a koinonia-fellowship – communion – eating bread and drinking wine together.

So far we have looked at how the church started as a fellowship but has drifted from that, that fellowship is not just a nice social time but rather a shared participation, spiritual association or real communion with one another. Francis looked at some images of this including the Biblical images of the branches abiding in the one vine – Jesus, and the members of the body with Christ as the head. We recognized that this is at the heart of what Jesus prayed for at the last supper and that it is implicit in the Trinity represented by Rublev’s icon, that God’s shared inner life is koinonia fellowship and we are invited to participate in this.

And then last week we considered where we imagine God to be in church when we are together, how transcendent and immanent God is to us and how the Bible describes God is in the midst of us, God wants to be among us, in our shared social and interpersonal space. When that space is clean and open -filled with love- the Holy Spirit inhabits, Jesus stands among us, God is present in his sanctuary so the world may see a witness in our unity.

Its not Christian to think that one can be holy and spirit-filled in isolation while not attending to the shared life of the church at whatever level in *koinonia*-fellowship. And from this we considered how we come to the table, that our unity is more important than our individual righteousness. Therefore we prepare ourselves immediately beforehand by sharing God’s peace to nurture or repair that unity of his body.

Today I’d like to briefly look at how Jesus spoke about his flesh and blood as presented by the Apostle John in our gospel reading and a bit of what that means for our koinonia-fellowship around the table.

To understand this strange saying of Jesus about eating his flesh and drinking his blood we need to look at a lot of context. This saying comes after Jesus has fed 5 thousand and then declared he is the bread of life and will feed all who come to him. Jesus attaches spiritual, metaphorical meaning to this real and physical event. He distinguishes the food which perishes from food which abides/lasts to eternal life in the same way as he speaks of the people who respond to him (people who reject him perish while people who accept him have eternal life). He makes repeated parallels between believing in the one the Father sent and eating the bread of life and uses eating as a metaphor for believing in and abiding in him - speaking in the same way as he does of the mutual indwelling of his disciples and himself, and himself and the Father in his prayer for his disciples in John 17.

Jesus gives this teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, a place where the Torah was read and explained. As he spoke of bread and eating, the connection would have been made to him saying that people are to live on the Word that comes from the mouth of God – not bread alone – and in speaking of eating him as bread he was claiming to be this Word. This is the radical statement that he was making.

So what did his disciples – the wider crowd of followers around him, not the twelve – what did they take offense at? Jesus reply to their offense gives us some clue. He speaks about what would they think if they saw him when he ascended back to the Father? In other words he was claiming to be the Word coming from the Father who would be returning too. Their offense is at the claim Jesus is making here rather than at the rather revolting nature of the metaphor of eating himself that he used.

Jesus saying his words are spirit and life and that flesh has no value also points to the fact that this saying about eating his flesh and drinking his blood is a metaphor rather than literal.

And then Peter’s response is not – I don’t mind eating your flesh – but rather – We have come to believe and know … All of Jesus’ hearers realized he was using a metaphor rather than literally promoting eating flesh and blood.

So this metaphor Jesus uses – this image of eating him – means taking in his life – the living bread that came down from heaven (as he describes himself back in verse 51) – taking this into ourselves. He speaks of this living bread just like the living water he spoke of at the well with the Samaritan woman. Whoever eats physical bread, like the manna in the desert, will be hungry again and eventually die but whoever eats the living bread will never hunger and will live forever.

When Jesus refers to flesh here it is not the same way as Paul means – not the sinful nature - but rather just the human, the non-spiritual. His flesh is what he gave for us in his death on the cross. We are to take what he gave in his death - forgiveness and reconciliation with God – into us.

When Jesus speaks of his blood here he is speaking of his life. People then believed that life was in the blood so the Hebrew scriptures forbid the drinking of blood. When Jesus uses this image, this metaphor here, he is saying that we should take his life, his resurrection life, which is poured out by the Holy Spirit, into us.

So eating his flesh and drinking his blood involves receiving the results of his death for us and living out his resurrection life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We remember too that Jesus also said – my food is to do the will of him who sent me. Eating, drinking Jesus involves doing the will of God in our lives, living in him in this too.

So how does this relate to communion, to our gathering around the table as koinonia-fellowship and eating bread and drinking wine together?

The celebration of communion is best understood through what Jesus did during his last Passover meal with the twelve. There is so much more there that reveals what Jesus was doing and saying that we re-enact and remember at Communion. I look forward to celebrating that with you next year on the Thursday before Easter. However today’s passage does point to some aspects of what we are receiving and believing in coming around the table and eating and drinking together.

Bread and wine are the common food and drink of that time. These are the staples of life that God provided in the land of Israel and God’s people always thanked him for these at each special meal. The Hamotzi blessing: Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. And the Kiddush : Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine. What Jesus did at the last supper was to give these the significance of being to us his body and blood, which we can understand from this passage. Just as he was using ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ as metaphors/images of his death and resurrected life which we are to take into ourselves, so the bread and wine are not literally his flesh and blood but carry the significance – when we eat them – of allowing us to enact our abiding in him, receiving the results of his death and his resurrected life in our life. By eating these we are metaphorically eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood and saying that we are living in him, the Word of God, and obeying his commandments, seeking to do the will of God in our lives. We are enacting that we believe and know that only Jesus has the words of eternal life and is the Holy one of God – as Peter exclaimed for the twelve. And note - we don’t establish our abiding in Christ by eating the bread and drinking the wine. Rather this eating and drinking is to enact the reality that we are already abiding in him.

At the time Jesus taught this, many of those who thought they were in fellowship with him found this too hard. Is our reaction to Jesus like that of Simon Peter and the twelve? If you believe and know that Jesus is the Holy one of God with the words of eternal life, to be received, obeyed, trusted as the very Word of God and live that out then you have that unity with him and anyone else who also believes and knows that. If you cannot accept the need to bring Jesus that fully into your life then taking part in communion around the table does not make sense as Jesus intended.

Our culture has a saying that relates to this: You are what you eat. This is applied to all sorts of things such as the junk food that leads to an unhealthy body but also the junk things we might read or listen to or even watch on TV which diminish our ability to think and relate to reality and the real world around us. What Jesus says here is very similar – do you eat me? – you are what you eat – are you prepared to be Jesus to the world around you – to be Jesus in your shoes, in your circumstances. This can’t be reduced to a personal private piety. This is not just God in me, Jesus in my heart with no outward expression needed. So it is not something we enact in private but we do it together.

We can only share koinonia-fellowship with one another if we are first one in Jesus Christ. Enacting that koinonia-fellowship unity according to his command in eating bread and drinking wine that have been given the significance of being his body and blood, is the deepest expression of that koinonia-fellowship we share with Jesus and each other.

Let’s make this next song our prayer for us to be living in Jesus, that he is everything to us. There is nothing greater.