

Sunday 16 August: Tenth Sunday after Trinity

From Consumers to Transformers

Readings: Ephesians 5:15–20, John 6:51–58

My initial reaction when faced with the fourth consecutive week in the lectionary devoted to Jesus talking about being the bread of life in John's Gospel, was to run away. That's one of the problems with staples, with daily bread. It needs to be fresh each time, baked daily. And to change the metaphor a bit, hasn't all the juice from this idea been squeezed out over the previous Sundays.

But that is exactly the point we are confronted with in this portion from John 6 – though we are asked to be consumers of this bread, this living bread, it is a kind of consumption which completely subverts the kind of approach we come with as products of a consumer society.

The wider theme across today's passages is about the nature of wisdom – whether it's the relationship between wisdom and political life in the account of the transition from David to Solomon in the book of Kings, the reflection on wisdom in Proverbs, or the exhortation that wisdom lies in being filled with the spirit in Ephesians. And in this passage from John, we are facing stormtrooper tactics to prise us out of our comfortable idea that wisdom is something out there - that can be got through our heads in the antiseptic world of ideas. Instead we are confronted with the notion that God communicates wisdom to us through the flesh and blood of our humanity.

First we are told to Eat God. And the word for eat is not the reverent melting of a wafer on our tongue, but the chomping that goes on when you get a good sized dog with a good sized bone, or even a lion with a carcass, sharpening those teeth against the bones even while he is using them to rip through some tasty muscle. Then we are told to be cannibals, because God is made flesh in the human being Jesus, who we are asked to eat.

At this time of swine flu, when we're still administering the bread only, and the celebrants are using antiseptic gel rather than the water and the lavabo, the idea of being God being so incarnational might not seem so attractive. This resistance goes back a long way. Even having a Latin word hides the connection between incarnation and meat.

But why *would* we want a God who becomes flesh if bodies give us pandemics and breeding grounds for disease, scope for dying and human misery or, as it suggests in Ephesians, human beings tend more to the narcotics and escapism of drunkenness and drugs in the face of the challenges of earthly and fleshly life than to finding it easy to access the holistic joys of 'being filled with the spirit.' Even as I pose the question, I find myself going to Irenaeus's classic statement, 'The unassumed is the unhealed.' It is precisely because of the trials and tribulations of embodied human life that we need God to enter it to heal and redeem it.

John's language encourages us to be consumers of the body of Christ, holding out our hands and receiving and eating. We know about being consumers in our society. But the consumption we have known about comes to a sticky end, as our society is discovering. It leaves us wanting more and more, eying up the next gadget, the latest trend, the most recent model of car or computer, the more stupendous return for our speculative investment, the bigger and better located house.

To be a consumer of the bread of life, John tells us, actually feeds us something which *metabolises* into life giving actions. It turns us into people who start to resemble what we

have consumed, following Jesus in his life's pattern of being *blessed*, but then also *broken* and *given* for the life of the world. But we become like him in knowing too that the more we are poured out, the more we find ourselves renewed. That instead of a vicious cycle of consumption which ends up with nobody satisfied and some as victims of the greed of the rest, we start to enter a life of renewal, transformation, regeneration, where the more we give away, the more we experience true abundance.

Our life, in other words, starts to take on the shape of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the shape of the baptismal life we have entered. The total opposite of a consumer culture in fact. I'm still struggling to think of how to describe this culture – how do we name the opposite of a consumer culture. I think I need some help from you. It takes 'you are what you eat' to a whole new level.

As we 'eat God' the life of God can be taken further and further into the life of the world – in one sense rather as the molecules pass through our bodies and recycle themselves in many ways in the world - and in turn that life of the world can be incorporated more and more into the life of God.

The setting for this teaching is the time of the Passover as Jesus teaches his Jewish followers about the bread from heaven by analogy with manna – the bread provided from heaven through their wilderness wanderings. This was bread which had to be eaten fresh on the day, you couldn't store it up. And it provoked a lot of grumbling. It's surprising, but my constant experience, that we can grumble at the most obviously providential gifts. And if they could grumble about bread for the journey, then that is as nothing with the tremendous resistance we put up to receiving the gift of the heavenly bread is not just bread for the day, but which takes us into the realm of eternal life – leaving us with the breathtaking idea that our material human lives are somehow taken into God's being and made eternal - divinised.

It is to the heart of this struggle that the passage from Ephesians speaks. 'Be filled with the spirit' doesn't have the carnivorous offensiveness of Eat God, but it speaks to the same reality. The author of Ephesians knows how appealing narcotics and stimulants can be in the face of the sheer difficulties of human existence.

I went through a period, in bereavement, of sleeping a lot more than usual. I consoled myself with the thought that at least I wasn't resorting to drink or drugs to escape the sense of pain and loss. Just as well I didn't turn to John Wesley's sermon on this notion of 'redeeming the time,' which we are exhorted to here. It can read as a real harangue about the criminality of the waste of time *which can be redeemed*. As someone who appreciates the joys of sleep at the best of times, and knows that 'he gives to his beloved sleep,' I found it hard to be told to take no more than the 6.5 hours I might need, though actually as a woman I might need a little more.

But then I think about the life of John Wesley, of his effect in transforming so many lives and indeed the life of a culture through this divine life coursing through him, and I have to recognise that at the heart of what he says is the awareness that 'in Christ' our lives have been moved from *chronos* time – the time which leads to decay and death, to *kairos* time, the time of opportunity and potential transformation, when even the dimension of time in our lives – that constant reminder of our mortality - has been kissed by eternal life.

John Wesley had certainly eaten of this bread. Seeing the dreadful ills of alcohol in his culture he responded practically with a culture of teetotalism and temperance. Hogarth, who lived and died in this parish, depicted the effects of gin in the tenements then within its

bounds. And still we are in a culture of binge drinking. But there is a part of me which resists these words as sounding very killjoy and anti-life and wants to hold up against them the first sign of John's gospel, where Jesus turns the water into wine, the best wine, as a wedding.

In fact I was at the blessing of a wedding yesterday – and there was plenty to drink. It was a lovely life-affirming celebration, where my cousin had brought his Japanese bride and their two little children back to live in this country after meeting and living for several years in Japan. They wanted to mark this new phase of life with a blessing, and it felt like a home coming as well – so fatted calves felt very appropriate.

My cousin explained to me a little of why there had been no ceremony before these words, and about what had brought them to the UK. And it had to do with the relentlessness of the Japanese work ethic, which sees men out till very late at night on a regular basis either working or feeding their addictions to cope with the stress from work, and women, who are still largely expected to be at home, deciding that marriage is just not a satisfying option for them. So the birth rate is down to just over one child per person, and the marriage rate is diminishing rapidly. Amidst the options of a faux western wedding, or the full intricacies of a Shinto ceremony in a faith they didn't belong to, they had gone for the paperwork-only legal option. A picture was developing for me in which 'redeeming the time' must also include the need for rest and recreation, and indeed for sabbath, where we are reminded that fundamentally our life comes through gift, not through the drivenness of our own labours. What better reminder of that than the beautiful children they had been given and wealth of being surrounded by family and friends, even though they faced the precariousness of needing to find a job and settle back into a completely different culture.

From what I see and experience in my workplace too, we are not immune from the Japanese experience. Time like every other part of our life needs redeeming, a saving conversion. The effect of incorporation into the body of Christ, through eating his flesh, is that no part of our earthly life is left unchanged. But we find it so hard to let God in to the nitty gritty of how we spend 'our' (note) time, or even let 'our' hair down.

And of course the other element to Sabbath is worship and the thanksgiving most profoundly embodied with the eucharist which bears that meaning. Now John Wesley knew the delights of being filled with the spirit. He was intoxicated by something much stronger than alcohol. And he and his brother were deeply sacramental – his brother Charles wrote some of the finest sacramental poetry and hymnody in the language. There was no dichotomy in those two between the sacramental life and the life of witness, or as one person memorably put it, 'one beggar telling another where to find bread.' It was the natural overflow into the rest of the week of the realities of having, with the rest of the body, celebrated afresh, the joys of being put back in touch with the life giving stream, of having fed on the bread of heaven.

So it can be natural for us too to become comfortable with the language of 'being filled with the spirit' – the experience of being incorporated, eating the bread of heaven, so that it becomes natural to us to find praise and worship welling up in us through the week and the spirit of thanksgiving pervading our daily experience, so we are learning to see with the 3-D lenses of faith, to see how God's grace and mercy is at work in the nitty gritty of our lives. And it is nitty and it is gritty, as this is a life which includes swine flu, cancer, unemployment, relationship breakdown etc etc. Perhaps one of the most shocking things about this eating God language is the way it challenges us to see God at work in every part of our embodied, physical, death-bound lives, bringing to them the new and living hope of a way through.

So I hope that we can find ourselves aware of the transforming encounter we are offered this morning, becoming people who are blessed, broken, given and poured out. Reading the Dick Sheppard biography recently I was very struck by someone who poured himself out extravagantly – and the thousands who came to mourn him testified to the divine and human love they found through that pouring out. And yet his life, like John Wesley's in some ways, had more than its fair share of pain and sadness – perhaps sometimes brought on by his tendency not to be aware of his own need to feed and be nourished and to enjoy those times of Sabbath rest where the awareness of gift and grace and time being taken into the eternal is restored.

Sabbath is a place where we remember life is pure gift, pure promise, we stop being seduced into thinking by our running around that we are autonomous. We remember that we are being fed, and remade to be given again. Where this is in bringing shelter and food to the soldiers and homeless, the alcoholics and drug-addicted, or some other 'fresh expression' of love, it is all connected with our own regeneration in eating God.