

Reflection

John 6

Over the last four weeks our Gospel reading has been working its way slowly through John 6. Like much of John's Gospel it consists of an event, then a long explanation of the meaning of that event. At 70 verses in length, it is not surprising the lectionary has chopped up this reading and given it to us bit by bit, but I think we miss some of the point when we hear it in small sections like this, so today I am going to do something a bit different. Instead of the usual range of Bible readings, we will just hear John 6, which is the Gospel readings that we heard from the end of July until next week. I will make some comments afterwards, but I will first invite you to respond what you hear differently when we hear all these readings in one sitting.

John 6

What do you hear differently when we listen to the whole chapter in one sitting?

Invite people to answer the question.

As we got towards the end of the reading, you may have noticed language that sounds like Holy Communion – Jesus talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. The connection to Holy Communion is hotly debated, with one Catholic theologian stating that if you miss the connection, you would have to be a Protestant! Plenty of Protestant theologians see the connection too.

This Gospel, as you have probably already noticed, is quite different to the others in many ways. One significant difference happens at the Last Supper. In the other Gospels, this is depicted as a Passover meal, whereas in this Gospel, it is simply a dinner with friends that happens to be the night before the Passover. There is theological significance in both and if we start asking which one is “right,” I think we are probably asking the wrong questions.

Another difference with that meal is all the other Gospels include the lines that we use in our Holy Communion liturgy – this is my body, this is my blood. It takes the Passover meal and shapes it into the shared meal of the early church that became ritualised into our Holy Communion. In this Gospel, instead of having those words during the Last Supper, we hear them at this point as part of the response to the feeding of the 5,000.

These words were rather challenging for the early Church, well, not the early church but for the people outside the church who overheard them and made assumptions. There were allegations in the wider society that Christians were cannibals, thanks to a misunderstanding of what these words were about. In Jewish society, as is depicted in this scene, these words were highly offensive. The use of such language was a taboo in Jewish thinking.

Our Bibles usually translate the phrase as “eat” the flesh, but this misses the nuance of the original language. The use of the words is closer to “gnaw” on the body. Take a brief moment to think about this different nuance of word choice. What do you see in gnawing that is different to just eating

Allow for feedback.

Eating is what we do at communion. It is polite and over in a moment. Gnawing, on the other hand, is often used to describe a dog with a bone working repeatedly at the bone until the last bits of nutrition are consumed. It is also the word used by the ancient historian Josephus to describe the people in the siege of Jerusalem who

gnawed on anything because the Zealots had destroyed the supplies of food inside Jerusalem. There was little nutrition left, but these people did whatever it took to fill their starving bellies.

Before I go on with this idea, there is one more thing we see when we consider this chapter as a whole. Jesus starts with the physical need but says we need to move beyond that and by the end of the chapter he is talking about spiritual needs. Some of us would have previously encountered the psychologist Abraham Maslow who asserts that we can only fill our higher level needs, such as emotional and spiritual needs, once our lower level needs are met. If we are hungry or afraid for where we will sleep tonight, we cannot even begin to address the psychological needs. We see this pattern repeated in this chapter. Jesus fills the physical needs and then encourages people to move beyond this.

So, back to gnawing on Christ. Do we stop at the lower-level needs as we gnaw on Christ? Perhaps we come to church to connect to other people. That is OK because we also must have those needs filled. However, once those needs are met, do we move on towards higher level spiritual needs or, like the crowd at the start of this reading, do we follow only so we can get more bread? What does it mean to really gnaw on Christ to get all the nourishment that he offers? How do we share that nourishment today?