

The Bread of Life ...

... and the way of God's Wisdom

A sermon given on the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity, 18th August 2024, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Connolly, in Beverley Minster

Proverbs 91-6; John 6:51-58

So this week, yet again, we have another serving of bread - are you fed up of bread yet? We have a little bit more because today Jesus is saying, *"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* Now, I don't know about you, but there's something repulsive about the idea of eating flesh and blood. It reminds me of cannibalism. This would have been the case for the Jews who were reading John's writing, whose food laws absolutely forbade the drinking of the blood of slaughtered animals because they thought that the blood was where the life was. (Sometimes cannibalism is a last resort. You think of the Uruguayan rugby team in 1972 - they had no option but to eat the dead bodies of their teammates to live.)

But here Jesus isn't talking about cannibalism to survive, he's saying that unless a person eats his flesh and drinks his blood, they have no life in them. So what is this life that Jesus is talking about? Eternal life, but much more than life that happens when we die. The theologian Moltmann says that eternal life has nothing to do with timelessness and death, but it is that fulfilled life here on Earth that makes us yearn that it will never end. Another writes, 'We are on the road to heaven now if today we walk with God. An eternal life is not a possession conferred at death; it is a present endowment; we live it now and we continue it through death.' And so that's what we're talking about, an eternal life which starts now in our everyday life and carries on forever. Jesus said that eternal life is this, *"That they should know God, the Father, and know the one whom the Father sent."* - so living life with God; a relationship with God; a life of following the way of Jesus to discover the wisdom of God.

Now, this brings us to our first reading from the Book of Proverbs. And wisdom there is personified as a woman and this wisdom was with God at the beginning. We think Jesus the Word was with God at the beginning, so let's compare the two: Lady Wisdom's task is to prepare a banquet, but first she builds a secure house with seven pillars; God's home was the womb of a Jewish teenager, and he made his home in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus (I love how the Message translation of John 1:14 says, 'The word of God was made flesh and moved into the neighbourhood.');

Lady Wisdom prepares a delicious range of food which shows off her many culinary skills; Jesus lived a life of 33 years, and in the last three years, he showed us the full nature of God in his teachings, his miracles, and ultimately, his sacrificial death; Lady Wisdom's invitation to the banquet is to all, to the simple and the intelligent, to the rich and the poor - it costs nothing to those who enter, although the cost has been borne by the host; and so with Jesus, his invitation to life is not dependent on our status or how good we are - it cannot be earned or bought, one has simply to hear and respond to the invitation.

I was thinking about the film *Oliver Twist*, especially that scene when the boys in the workhouse were eating gruel, and yet they could see their masters eating the most wonderful banquet - 'food, glorious food' - the boys watching others eat fabulous food but never being allowed to

touch; always seeing but not joining in; never getting close enough, not even to smell it, never feeling the benefit of it in their tummies and in their lives. Some of us are like that with God: we prefer to observe Jesus through detached, cool, rational minds; we give intellectual assent to his incarnation, death and resurrection; we keep him at a distance; we don't feel the benefit of his life in our bodies or our lives. And yet this Jesus today is claiming that to have the life that he offers, we must somehow ingest him, consume him, and become intimately enjoined with him as we are with the food that we eat - this too might seem scandalous, but this is the gospel that we preach.

And there's no knowing Christ without this total engagement. Paul wrote to the Galatians, *'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.'* The incarnation, the coming of God in our world in flesh and blood means that just like Oliver, we must get up, we must come forward, we must hold out empty hands and we must ask for more and receive from God and then we must gulp the wine and chew the bread until it becomes a part of us. Intimacy with God doesn't just affect what you do on a Sunday morning - it affects your whole life; it affects your decisions; what you do with your time, your money; who you hang out with; who or what you worship; it affects how you react when things don't go your way. And this intimacy with God starts with a saying of 'YES'. And then every day we continue through daily saying YES and surrendering our plans, our purposes, our time, our ego, so we can experience and live out the goodness of God in a world which does not honour him. It is not an easy road to travel, and yet it is the road which leads to life, life in all its fullness and the way of wisdom, God's wisdom.

There is another wisdom - if you carry on in the Book of Proverbs, it talks about 'Lady Folly.' Let's call her the World's Wisdom. How does the World's Wisdom persuade me how to live? It says that my life isn't about goodness, doing good; it's about happiness, my happiness, my self-fulfilment; it's about how things look, how I look, how I seem, being seen to make it. And this way, weakness in ourselves and others is despised. But in the way of God, weakness is the way to the Father. In the way of folly, the world's wisdom, those who don't contribute to our society are shunned and seen as less than other. In God's wisdom, those who are vulnerable and poor are elevated among other people. In the world's way, our god, ultimately, is ourselves - our identities are formed by what we achieve and how we appear to others.

So, the way of God's wisdom, the way of the world's wisdom, and a choice.

How might God be speaking to us today through his word? He always wants to speak to us. For some of us, it may be that God is prompting you to say YES to the invitation to follow in the way of God's wisdom rather than the way of the World's Wisdom. To others, it may be that you feel like those boys in Oliver, always looking on but never truly knowing - perhaps God is saying, 'Come to me today, hold out your hands and ask for more. ' Or maybe you identify that even though you're in church, your life has been following the way of the world's wisdom. Whatever has stirred you, please take a moment now to respond to how the Holy Spirit might be speaking to you.

Reading Texts

Proverbs 9:1-6

¹ *Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars. ² She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table. ³ She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town, ⁴ 'You that are simple, turn in here!'
To those without sense she says, ⁵ 'Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed. ⁶ Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.'*

John 6:51-58

⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'* ⁵² *The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'* ⁵³ *So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'*