

Readings for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

15th August 2021

First Reading: 1 Kings 2:10-12,3:3-14

David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel: St John 6:51-58

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."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true

food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 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 forever.”

A Reflection for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

This week’s Gospel reading continues Jesus’ teaching on the theme of bread from St John’s Gospel. Over the past three weeks, we have heard of the miraculous feeding of 5000 people, a sign that shows Jesus’ divinity. We have heard Jesus describe himself as the ‘bread from heaven’, the one who fulfils and surpasses the manna, the Old Testament Law, and satisfies our spiritual hunger. And we have heard Jesus describe himself as the ‘bread of life’, the one who sustains our spiritual life and gives eternal life.

Once again, our Gospel reading this week starts where the previous week’s Gospel left off.

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.

As Christians, the allusions to the Eucharist in this statement are unmistakable, and the idea of Jesus’ flesh being consumed does not perhaps seem as strange as it ought, and as it surely was to his original audience. Today we are invited to think about this mystery again.

The scene depicted took place in the synagogue at Capernaum, so was a discussion in a religious setting. Jesus’ teaching evokes the very reasonable question of how can this be possible? ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ In his answer, Jesus ignores ‘how’ but explains ‘why’ and goes on to link the eating of his flesh and drinking his blood with his earlier promise of eternal life. Consuming blood was strictly forbidden by the Jewish Law. It is clear that this statement is to be understood metaphorically, and Jesus’ audience also understood this as they debated what he could mean. Although we understand this statement metaphorically, we must never forget that such metaphorical eating of Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood are possible only because a real and incarnate Christ gave his life in a violent death.

The belief in Christ who gave his life so that we might have eternal life was vividly represented from the earliest days of the church by the Eucharist, instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper. And the doctrine of the Eucharist, including what we believe about the bread and wine, has been the subject of question, debate and sometimes controversy down the centuries. Is Christ present? And if so, how?

From the earliest days of the church, it was understood that the bread and wine conveyed the body and blood of Christ to the believer, though language and emphasis varied. From the fourth century, writings show evidence of differences in understanding of the transformation of the bread and wine during consecration. Many of the Church Fathers contributed to the development of that doctrine but, perhaps wisely, there was little attempt at precise description of what is a holy mystery. Controversy over the issue first appeared in the Middle Ages and made more precise definition desirable, though no less difficult. The greatest controversies occurred at the Reformation. It is a complex area, especially in the detail, and I am no expert, but I will attempt to explain the main points of view.

At one end of the spectrum of understanding is transubstantiation, articulated most notably by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. This understanding holds that the substance of the elements is changed into Christ's body and blood, even though their outward appearance remains that of bread and wine. At the opposite end of the spectrum, is the position taken by Zwingli and some others at the Reformation who understood the Lord's Supper as a memorial rite in which there is no change in the elements of bread and wine. In the same period, Luther, defended a doctrine of consubstantiation which says that, after consecration, both the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ co-exist. A wide range of other intermediate positions and views have also been expressed, at the time of the Reformation and since then.

In Anglicanism, the doctrine of the Eucharist was the subject of much debate, particularly in the 19th century, including in our own church. In 1860, the Bishop of Brechin, Alexander Penrose Forbes, was tried for heresy by his fellow Bishops for his teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament. This was primarily a disagreement over details, and since then, our church has accepted the 'Real Presence' of Christ in the sacrament. This holds that the Eucharist is more than simply a memorial rite but that the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament is a mystery beyond human explanation.

We see this doctrine expressed in our Eucharistic liturgy. Following the narrative of the institution, come what are termed the anamnesis and oblation, in which Christ's saving work is recalled and we offer the elements and ourselves to God. Then comes the epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit on the bread and wine so 'that they may be the body and blood of Christ'. Christ's presence in the bread and wine.

This is but a small part of the theology of the Eucharist. Our own experience and understanding of the Eucharist is as individual and personal as our relationship with Jesus Christ. However, the purpose of Christ's presence in the sacrament, as the epiclesis continues, is that 'we may be kindled with the fire of your love and renewed for the service of your Kingdom'.

This leads me, briefly, to the other readings set for today. Chapter 5 of the letter to the Ephesians emphasises that faith in God should be shown in how we live our lives. Last week's reading from this letter told us that we should be imitators of God, that as children of God, we need to act in ways that reflect that identity. To do so, requires wisdom. Today's reading starts: 'Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.' Wisdom is also the subject of today's Old Testament reading as King Solomon is introduced and, asked by God what God should give Solomon, requests the gift of wisdom. The Old Testament scholar, Gerhard von Rad, wrote: 'All knowledge about the world...begins with knowledge about God. The fear of the Lord, knowledge about God, is the beginning of wisdom.' Much more could be said about wisdom, but that will be for another time.

Solomon's request for wisdom came in the context of worship. The letter to the Ephesians also emphasises the importance of worship, singing and praising God and giving thanks. To do thus is a wise choice. And giving thanks brings us back to the Eucharist, the ultimate way of giving thanks. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek word for Thanksgiving. Thus, our Eucharistic prayer has the title 'The Great Thanksgiving'.

Jesus said:

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.

To receive the bread of Christ's body is to participate in his life, is to know more of God and grow in wisdom, is to be open to God's will for our life.