

Trinity XII, August 19th 2018
Jn.6:51-8; 1 Cor.10:14-22; Proverbs 9:1-6
Jesus, true and living bread

Somewhere, deep in the bowels of Church HQ, there is a committee room where ecclesiastical civil servants dream up brilliant ways for preachers to explain the Christian faith: striking images and similes and comparisons which will seize people's imaginations, convince their minds, and set their hearts on fire with love for God.

One of their suggestions concerns how to talk about heaven, or, as John's Gospel puts it, *eternal life*. Tell the people this, said the Church's presentational geniuses: tell them that heaven is being able to praise God for ever and ever and ever, that it is singing hymns and playing harps, tell them, in short, that it's a bit like being in church. The worship service that never ends.

I can almost see the hearts on fire all around me.

What a catastrophically boring way of understanding what we hope for. Given such explanations, is it any wonder that lots of people think that the whole idea of eternal life even if you could believe it, which is hard enough is, well, rather unappealing? Why you would want to go on and on and on and on doing *anything* – and of all the things that you could imagine doing forever, would it *really* be church? Don't get me wrong: I love church. But the idea of church without end does not exactly make my heart sing.

We shouldn't be too hard on that poor committee. Eternal life by its very nature is impossible to describe: our brains, all our language and categories are designed to cope with *this* world and *this* life. Us imagining heaven is like acorns imagining oak trees: we're destined for it, it will happen to us, but knowing what it means it is for now beyond us. Now we see but in a glass dimly. One day we shall see face to face – but not yet.

That said: there are still better and worse ways of trying to speak of Heaven. Here's one that is better than church without end. If there's one thing we know about humans, it's that we *hunger*. We hunger and we are never satisfied. We hunger for our next meal, and almost as soon as it's finished we wonder about the next one. But of course it is not just food. We are full too of deeper hungers: for recognition. For respect. The hunger for beauty, or for love. For meaning and purpose, for the reassurance that our life is not stupid or pointless. The hunger for righteousness, that we should be better and bigger and wiser and stronger. To be human is to be filled with hunger. We are one great furnace of desire. It's what drives us, and energises all we do.

And the first great claim of Christianity is that in the face of our great hunger, the world is not enough. The world is not enough. Our longing is so vast, so infinite, that the things of this world can never satisfy it. We can never *stop* hungering. Even great things – the love between people, ravishing beauty, noble character, awesome achievement – all of it seems to point beyond itself and cry, 'still there is more'. Still there is more. You were made for

more than this. Your heart will be restless until you find it. This, wonderful as it is, is not your home.

So where is? Well, that place we've tried to describe with words like heaven, or eternal life. Not just this reality, going on and on. But the meeting of our hunger: the moment when wanting turns into the joy of having, the climax of all our hopes. The time when purpose, love, beauty, wisdom, goodness – all the goods, all the blessings – flow into our lives and never cease flowing, when they overflow, when we become completely and forever shot through with them, when we become them. That's what heaven means. The great banquet, hunger turned into joy.

I know the language sounds strained. That's inevitable: we don't yet have the language for what we mean. We know not yet what we shall be, says the first letter of John. And that's not just a matter of intellect, of lacking the right words and understanding. Our inadequacy goes deeper than that. When you think of what we are made for, there comes too the crushing knowledge of how unready we are for it. We have made ourselves unready, through weakness, through negligence, through our own deliberate fault. In all sorts of ways, some of which we are crystal clear about, some of which we hardly know, we have cut ourselves off from our own true home. We have lost ourselves in a distant country.

And so here is the second great claim of Christianity: God does not just sit at his banqueting table, alone, waiting forever for guests who will never come. No, when we are still far off, he comes to meet us, and to bring us home. God comes into the distant country, right into the midst of this hungry and gone-wrong world. Jesus of Nazareth is what God looks like translated into human. He is the life of Heaven, lived out on Earth. Get to know this life, says Christianity – *really* get to know this life, not just know *about* it, but *know it*, let it be woven in the very fabric of your own, let it become one with you – and heaven will start to live in you too. You'll be on the way home.

That's what's really going in our reading from John's Gospel today. I am the true bread that comes down from Heaven, says Jesus. Whoever eats this bread, will live forever. The bread that I give for the life of the world is myself. In other words, the one sure way home, to God's great banquet and the end of all our hunger is to have Jesus at the very centre of your life. To know that your goodness, your wisdom, your love and strength are not enough. They're weak, they're confused, they fail and run out. The centre of your life needs to be the strong one, the simple one, the pure and inexhaustible one. The one who conquered death, whose goodness never fails: Jesus. If he is at your centre, he will raise you from within and make you fit for the banquet. He will feed you with Himself, and you will become ready for more and more and more, till one glorious day you are as He is: you will be shot through with love and joy and goodness and there will be no more darkness in you. You may not be there yet, but one day, fed by this living bread, you will reach the promised Land.

And how do you do this? How do you eat the living bread, how do you make Jesus the centre of your life? I have very simple and unoriginal answers. Number one, you are baptised – as I said last week, 'christened', in-Christed. In the water, your life is fused with Jesus' life. Number two, you eat and drink – really eat and drink, the real bread and real wine that is on this table. The cup of blessing that we bless, says St. Paul in today's reading

from Corinthians, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Jesus becomes the centre of your life through regular, faithful receiving of the Eucharist. And that's why, despite the fact that I am rather glad church does not go on forever, coming here Sunday by Sunday, deliberately taking in Jesus, *is* central to being a Christian. Coming to church really matters. And number three – although really, without it one and two are useless – you pray. Pray: Jesus be my centre. Jesus be my centre. We get things wrong when we imagine that prayer is fundamentally about asking God to do things – stop that war, heal that person, get me that job. Those kind of requests have their place – but it is a secondary place. The primary prayer, the prayer that underlies them all, is: Lord Jesus, be my centre. God, give me yourself.

Pray that, clearly, deliberately, slowly every single day and He will not refuse you. He is the true and living bread. He broke Himself on that cross to feed you, and he will feed you now and evermore.