



14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

25<sup>th</sup> August 2024

Jesus said,

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.”

*Why Jesus pulls down the division between sacred and secular*

Main verse:

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.”  
(John 6:56)

Have you noticed there have been some concepts in the readings over the last few weeks that are really difficult to understand?

The readings have divided one of Jesus' longest messages, given shortly after feeding the masses near the shore of Galilee.

Today we've come to its dramatic end.

I encourage you to open your bibles or a pew bible to page 1520.

Rather than starting at verse 56, I'd like us to go back to verse 55, because we have kind of divided Jesus mid-sentence.

Verse 55 says, *"For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink."*

Then Jesus continues to say, *"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain in me, and I in them."* (v56)

Today I want to tackle the really challenging picture that Jesus has been speaking about over the past couple of weeks.

We've heard Jesus call Himself *"the bread of life which came down from heaven"* (v48, 51).

Jesus was referring to God's physical provision of bread-like substance, called 'manna' which sustained and nourished the children of God during their time in the wilderness.

Every day they had to physically go out and collect the manna from the ground, prepare and cook it, and then eat it. They had to digest it for it to do any good in their lives.

They couldn't just look at it and revere it. They couldn't just go out and marvel at the wonder of God's provision as it sat on the ground. They had to seek it, collect it and eat it, or as Jesus goes on to say, 'feed on it'.

*"Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me."*(v57)

Jesus is saying we must 'feed on him', because His flesh or body is real food and His blood is real drink. (v 55)

Now this statement is as shocking today as it was when Jesus first said it.

Even Jesus' listeners were absolutely flabbergasted over His words, *"How can this man give us his flesh to eat."*(v52)

It just sounds, as Bill mentioned last week, so much like cannibalism, doesn't it?

And if anyone simply walked in from our neighbourhood, joining us today, they would think this too. And just like in Jesus' day, they may have been so offended by what he said, they would also up and walk out!

That's how divisive and offensive Jesus' words were.

That's why his disciples and others who were following him grumbled about what He'd said, remarking, *"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"*(v60)

Jesus replied, *"Does this offend you?"*(v61)

And every Jew in attendance would have muttered – "Yes! Absolutely it does!"

What on earth was Jesus doing? What, I believe, Jesus was attempting to do is completely pull down, destroy and obliterate the separation of what's regarded as 'spiritual, unearthly and sacred' from what's regarded as 'real, down-to-earth, practical and secular'.

It is so easy for us to separate and compartmentalise our lives and the activities that we do. We regard some activities or actions as 'spiritual, sacred and religious', yet we degrade other activities or behaviours as 'non-spiritual, secular, common and nonsacred'.

We can even go so far as divide our week into days in which we do religious activities, like attending church, or reading our Bible, from routine everyday activities like eating dinner, working (whether cleaning or our job), and doing our hobbies like playing golf, reading, or watching TV.

The point is however, from God's perspective there is no division between the 'spiritual' and the 'natural'. When we feed on, or get our sustenance from Jesus' sacrifice of Himself, when His physical body was broken, and physical blood was shed, we are totally obliterating any division between what is spiritual and sacred and what is secular and earthly.

You see, you simply can't get any more practical and earthy as eating and drinking and the reality of having to digest these foods for them to do any good to our well-being.

That is why, I think, Jesus made the foundational spiritual practice for His body, the Church, to revolve around a meal – a nourishing necessity of life.

Every day we sit down to eat. Every day we ensure we drink sufficient water. Without these substances we simply cannot live. In the same way, every day when we sit to eat, or grab a cup to drink, we are reminding ourselves of our absolute dependence on Jesus' life, His teachings, His sacrifice of Himself, and the gift of His Spirit.

Jesus is the means by which we live. He is our source of life.

And that's why he makes such a big deal about us 'abiding' or 'remaining' in him, or to put it another way – feeding on the reality of Jesus' presence in our hearts as the most crucial source of our physical life and well-being.

Such complete and utter dependence on Jesus' presence in every aspect of our life is not easy to grasp by most, nor is it easy to live out practically.

Those who have not been spiritually reborn, simply cannot understand it.

They'll remark, "I don't get it, why do you say you *need* to read your bible every day? And why do you say, 'prayer is like breathing'?"

Such a life-sized commitment to Jesus and His teachings was ultimately what caused many to stop following Him.

*"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"* (v60)

They were thinking:

'How can we place our entire life into the hands of this nobody from Nazareth?'

'We know His father and mother, and where he's from, so what does he mean he comes from heaven?'

'We don't see him overthrowing Rome. We don't see him sitting on the king's throne.'

'We don't see him changing our daily struggles.'

'No, he may be able to offer us a free lunch, but he's not worth giving our lives to, let alone dying for.'

But that kind of absolute surrender to Jesus is exactly what He demands of those who follow him.

I was reading this week about a teaching pattern of Jesus that I had not noticed before. When I heard it, though, I knew it absolutely to be true.

Someone said that the journey of discipleship is a journey from "Come and see to come and die".

Think about it: the first invitation Jesus offered to those who desired to follow him, and learn from him, was "Come and see". We see this in Andrew and John (John 1:39).

And this is the invitation we extend to everyone in our community today – 'Come and see. Check us out. Be amongst us. Give Jesus a go.'

But this 'come and see' level is never where Jesus intends people to stay.

As people continue following Him, and listening to Him teach, He keeps turning up the heat by defining what it means to follow Him.

-If you want to be my follower, obey my commandments (John 8:31).

-If you want to be my follower, love each other (John 13:31)

-If you want to be my follower, you must bear much fruit (John 15:8)

Then, shortly before returning to His Father, Jesus started turning up the heat to sauna levels:

-If you want to be one of my disciples you must carry your cross; you must be willing to die for me (see Matthew 16:24-26, John 12:25-26).

That's the discipleship process Jesus calls His followers to take.

The last verse in today's reading is, *"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."* (v66)

Did Jesus get depressed, or try to convince them to stay?

Quite the opposite. He threw out a challenge, *"You do not want to leave too, do you?"* (v67)

That's the decision each of us must make.

When Jesus says something hard to understand or down-right offensive, will we walk away allowing other interests to dominate our thinking?

Will we rationalise these hard teachings, dishonouring them as merely 'symbolic' and 'figurative'?

Let us ask ourselves what might we have done at this point?

We may not have Jesus physically standing in our presence, but He is here amongst us spiritually and His presence is in our hearts.

Every time we allow ourselves to be distracted or pulled away from this 'whole-of-life' commitment, aren't we doing the same as those who turned away that day?

It's never been easy to follow Jesus. It takes faith, and trust, and the willingness to remain with Him, even when the going gets tough.

Jesus is never going to insist that we follow Him, nor that we remain in Him.

These are the choices we make every day.

And if we have made the same decision that Simon Peter made, when he declared, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,*" (v68) we'll be confident that we have found the greatest treasure – and we'll be willing to die to keep it.

Shortly, we will come forward to receive Jesus' spiritual presence afresh, in the symbols of bread, wine or grape juice.

As we reach out our hands to receive the bread, that which is normally regarded as earthly and physical, becomes for us spiritual food which is holy and sacred.

Likewise, when we drink from a cup, that which is normally regarded as juice or wine, becomes for us a sacred spiritual drink.

Our participation in this act of worship, causes the earthly and secular to be transformed into the spiritual and sacred.

And, more broadly, when we allow the presence of Jesus to flood every aspect of our physical lives, there no longer remains any portion that can be deemed secular or non-sacred.

For those who have moved from 'come and see' to 'come and die' find themselves hidden with Jesus Christ, and their eternal life with God has already begun and will continue forever more.

Amen.