

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 16 AUGUST 2009

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John 6: 51-58

“The Eucharist as Transformational Act”

John 6: 51 - 58 (Inclusive Text)

'I am the living bread which has come down from heaven.
Anyone who eats this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I shall give
is my flesh, for the life of the world.'

Then the crowds started arguing with one another:
How can this one give us his flesh to eat? they said.

Jesus replied:
'I tell you most solemnly,
if you do not eat my flesh or drink my blood,
you have no life in you.

'Those who do... have eternal life,
and I will raise them up on the last day.

'For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.
Those who do eat and drink, live in me, and I live in them.

'As the living God sent me, and I live because of God,
so whoever eats (and drinks) draw life from me.

'This is the bread come down from heaven;
not like the bread our ancestors ate, they are dead.
But anyone who eats this bread will live forever'.

1. How do we make sense of Jesus' crude imagery?

How can we make sense of the crude and seemingly cannibalistic utterances of John's Jesus when he says, "if you do not eat my flesh or drink my blood, you have no life in you." (John 6:53)

It is not surprising that the Jews were highly offended when Jesus spoke these words. In Jewish thought of the Old Testament, the metaphor "to eat someone's flesh" was one expressing hostile action. (Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 284) The term "eater of the flesh" was a title for the devil, the adversary. Drinking of blood was a horrendous act forbidden by the Law.

Raymond Brown suggests that John may have used the crude words "flesh" with anti-docetic intent. The Docetics taught that Jesus only seemed like a human being, since God was pure and transcendent and could not be defiled by humanity. (Brown, 291)

Yet, as language, Jesus' teaching sought to suggest something greater than a literal reading. But this is not a simple matter. As John Sherman reminds us:

Throughout the centuries, and especially since the Reformation in the 16th century, the church has struggled with this problem. The various doctrines about the sacrament – transubstantiation, consubstantiation, representation and memorial – all find support for their particular viewpoint in this passage. (<http://seemslikegod.org/lectionary/archives/eleventh-sunday-after-pentecost-august-16-2009>)

2. Utterances are productive and powerful, effecting new reality

I suggest that this teaching is an utterance, a discourse that has the power to effect a new reality. As Sarah Mills writes in her book *Discourse*, discourses “consist of utterances which have meaning, force and effect within a social context” (13).

She gives the example of a judge sentencing someone to imprisonment. The force of her/his pronouncement transforms the accused into a criminal and enforces a sentence accepted by society.

Added to this meaning, force, and effect, Mills writes that a discourse structures “both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity” (15).

In Margaret Atwood's book *The Blind Assassin*, one of her main characters, Iris Chase Griffin, expresses her marginalised identity in this discourse about herself.

In accepting Myra's offer to drive her to a park rather than her walking there, she feels shame. “Not yet, though,” Myra tells her, and asks Iris to sit and wait for an hour on a bench. Iris utterances her inner shame, discardedness and powerlessness into conscious discourse, defining and identifying herself:

“More and more I feel like a letter. Deposited here. Collected there.
But a letter addressed to no one!”

This utterance of being an unwanted and unnoticed “letter without destination” is expressive of the challenge of coping with her unreliable 82 year-old body, and reflective of her losses and tragedies. The utterance will remain as a power that names and reinforces her identity and alienation.

The discourse of Jesus seeks to address such disconnected being-in-the-world, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger described the human condition in his early work *Being and Time*. As a posted-object, a “thrown-project, ... [one finds themselves] dumped in this world” (James P Mackey, *Modern Theology*, 12).

3. Invitation to life-changing meals

Jesus' language in our text addresses human alienation by inviting us into that intimate space of sharing a meal. In this new social context, Jesus seeks to provide real life as sustenance, which when eaten gives life forever, gives an unspeakable quality of life, introducing us to the divine in our midst. This one who invites us is Jesus Christ, the Word, the Creative force of life, made human, dwelt and

continues to dwell among us, in many ways, and in the way of the Eucharist, the sharing of the bread and wine.

The discourse we find in our reading this morning seeks to embrace the subject of food, of sharing a meal that has the power to effect a new reality. This meal has already effected a new reality, new identity, new relationships, as Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, prostitutes and tax collectors, were brought together by Jesus to share table fellowship.

It is equivalent to “that ecstatic moment when something or someone we long for becomes so intense it becomes palpable” <http://sacraconversazione.blogspot.com/> ; capable of being sensed, touched, felt, experienced in the fullness of all our senses; palpable in shaping community with enemies and strangers.

For me, the Eucharist has true effect and power, ecstatic moments of experiencing love and grace, when it sustains us in our deepest hour of thrown-ness and meaninglessness.

This is what Rachel and Sidney experienced in the movie *Rachel Getting Married*, which I watched this week.

Rachel’s father, Paul Buckman has opened his home for a whole weekend for his daughter’s wedding. Musicians, singers, actors, poets, friends, and family converge to connect, eat, practice, and finally celebrate Rachel and Sidney’s marriage.

All extended family reunions eventually release submerged debris. Chaos and the buried past becomes a dis-lodging guest. Rachel’s sister, Kym, is a recovering drug addict who leaves a court-ordered rehabilitation hostel to attend the wedding. Kym, excellently acted by Anne Hathaway, is deeply troubled and troubling for the whole family.

The elements of painful family history keep rising, even in the most unexpected moments. During a fun competition over who can fill the dishwashing machine the fastest, a plate emerges, painted by a child, and we learn it is the baby brother that was killed when Kym crashed the car years ago. And we learn, there is responsibility and resolved but existent deep grief everywhere!

Yet in all this palpable chaos, Rachel and Sidney (who is an amazing African-American musician) exchange vows that empower their present and future lives.

Rachel: Paul Buckman [her father] likes to say, the measure of a great life is not how well loved you are but how well you love others. Sidney, teach me that, every day! You are so full of grace. And I promise before God and these beautiful people, that I will love you fiercely and sweetly and I look forward to sharing that life with you. Thank you for marrying me!

Sidney: All that I ever wanted was just to hear music. And, when I met you, I heard you! And, Rachel, you are the most beautiful thing I have ever heard. Thank you for marrying me!

Rachel: You’re welcome!

4. Eucharist is a radical, archetypal, transformational act

In conclusion, to receive the sacred meal, to participate and anticipate the power of new identity and personal and social reality, releases new energy and commitment to accompany God in our

everyday human existence, as Rachel and Sidney did in their new step in their relationship, despite the crude and real challenges of their lives.

And central to this newfound sustenance and community, can only be a renewed desire to express distributive justice-compassion, particularly for those who suffer the blight of poverty and hunger.