

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 19 AUGUST 2012, PENTECOST +12
Rev. Anneke Oppewal



Leviticus 17:10-14, Psalm 111, John 6:51-59

As I was pondering the words from John 6 we read this morning over the past week, the words from a Wesley hymn we will be singing at the end of the service kept playing in the back of my mind: "And can it be that I should gain an interest in my saviour's blood".

I didn't think I could! Nor did I think I should.

As conversations about communion in the last couple of months have made clear, both inside this Church, in committee meetings and personal pastoral contacts, as well as with secular friends outside the Church, the use of the terminology "my saviour's blood" is a stumbling block for many. The whole concept of the blood of Christ as a meaningful theological concept has become problematic. And with it the concepts of atonement, of Jesus' sacrificial death and of his blood somehow "cleansing" us as well.

"It's just too gross when you stop to think about it" said someone, so if you can only use the "blood" terminology when you don't think, or if you can't use it without a lengthy explanation about what the metaphor stands for, than clearly the terminology is not adequate and should be discarded.

Someone else told me how, after a tour of duty in Afghanistan, and seeing too much flesh torn to shreds and too much blood spattered on his uniform, that he simply could not attend communion any more if those words were used: Body and blood. Because the images of what he had seen and experienced would get in the way and he would need days to recover his equilibrium.

I can relate to both these sentiments. I'm a child of my time and the "blood and bones" terminology so popular in the 19th Century doesn't sit well with me. And I have read, heard and seen enough hair raising stories for unpleasant images to surface unbidden when using the "blood and bones" language in Church ritual. Apart from that I have theological issues with the concept. I know the dogma of Jesus as a vicarious and substitutionary sacrifice for our sin is relatively young, And I find it difficult to square with the God of love and compassion Jesus preaches in the New Testament. A God who wants to see blood to balance the sins of the world? A God who buys of his own wrath by killing what he loves most? I find that really difficult to reconcile with the boundless compassion and love I meet in Jesus.

Having said that, to me, born and raised in the Church, the words were, and in a way still are, words of Jesus that have been handed down to us to use, no matter what our personal preferences or sensitivities might be. These Words have, over time, embedded themselves deep in my subconscious and have become synonymous with community, with knowing Christ near when participating in the Lord's supper and a sense of belonging to the body and blood of the Lord in this world. Re-enforcing and re-affirming every time I hear them or use them that the people gathered around the table, including me, are not just any community, any good willing and well meaning group of people conducting a ritual, but that we are people called and committed to being the hands and feet, the mind and heart of Christ in this world. No matter how fragile and fallible, somehow, in this ritual,

for just 15 minutes or so, at some deep level, we become what we have been called to be, taking in the essence of who Christ was and came for and ingesting it like we would food and drink.

A very deep experience that has become more meaningful over the years and has fed and nurtured me at levels too deep to understand. I've known communion services pull me out and pull me through experiences and times of great difficulty. I've known communion to fill me with a joy and a spiritual glow that I never experienced anywhere else. And I've discovered it is one of the places where I am very, and truly, vulnerable. Being refused the peace once by an angry colleague is something that hurt in a way no angry words or silent treatment could have done. Being refused communion in a conservative church because I was an ordained female minister was a rejection I found much harder to handle than being ignored in that same church at clergy meetings by male colleagues who didn't approve of me being there.

Communion to me is sacred. The "body and blood" terminology has been part of that sacredness for as long as I can remember. And it is not always easy to take a step back and listen to those who struggle with those words and create room for the possibility that those words, that are so meaningful to me, may need to be rephrased because they are preventing others from entering into that same sacred space I value so much for the nurture and the strength it provides.

This week I listened to a program on Radio National about the development in the fifties and sixties of gospel music into rock music. Apparently Ray Charles was the first musician to take the gospel he knew from Church, and basically by speeding it up, changed it into what we now know as soul music. He didn't only change the tune though, he also changed the words. Instead of "I know Jesus saves my soul", he sang "I know a woman across town". At the time many considered this as something that could not have come from anywhere but the devil. The language Ray Charles used was still pretty veiled and fairly innocent though, full of metaphor. Only gradually, over the next decade, that changed too, from Muddy Waters singing "I am a King Bee, and I want you to be my Queen, so together we can make honey the world has never seen", to the Rolling Stones and their "Let's spend the night together" and "I can get no satisfaction", which were pretty explicit in their content. Using language that offended many at the time.

The gospel of John talks about Jesus flesh and blood with that level of explicitness or worse. Jesus' words as they are recorded in chapter 6 are explicit and they are offensive. Not only to some of us, who listen to them 2000 years later in a totally different context, but there and then, when they were written down. They are meant to provoke, they are expected to shock and alienate, they aroused irritation, and turned away people who had been following Jesus up to that point. Even then.

"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".

Does he really have to repeat it so many times? Does he really have to use the word *sarx* for flesh and the word *trogo* instead of *esthio* for eating? Words that leave little room for spiritualising the whole concept? *Sarx* is flesh as you can see it in a Butcher's cooling room, not the little chunks you may encounter concealed in a stew. And *trogo* means chomping, chewing, eating without too much regard for table manners.

I want you to chomp my flesh and guzzle up my blood. Gross! Words that put people off....

Over the centuries we tamed the grossness of that to a small bit of light white bread and a sip of grape juice. Soundlessly and piously consumed. And we have come to regard the meal, the eating and drinking, the words as metaphor, as ritual, as a spiritual exercise connecting us to the divine.

And that is exactly what John was trying to prevent.

John writes his gospel in the context of a Christian community that celebrates communion every week. They break bread and drink wine in imitation of what Jesus did with his disciples in an upstairs room in Jerusalem the night before he died. They use the words he used. This is me, my body, for you. This is me, my blood, poured out, for you. And they struggle with the concepts. How can Jesus' death have been "for them"? Who was Jesus? What had he come to do? What did the words and the metaphors that had come to them from the tradition mean? Body? Blood? Bread, wine?

And they start to make connections. With the story of Moses and the manna come down from heaven. With the book of Genesis and the concept of God's "Word", God's wisdom being around even before Creation. With the law as some of them knew it from the Torah. They are a multi-cultural, multi-faith community and their understanding comes at many different levels and relates to many different concepts and backgrounds. There are dyed in the wool Jews who know the Jewish tradition like the inside of their back pocket, there are pagans who have come over from the mystery religions, there are cynics, platonists, persians, indians, africans and John, in his gospel, tries to connect to them all and tell the story of Jesus in language that they will all, at their own level, be able to understand. In the meantime trying to make sure he straightens their theologies out as well. Theologies that were, at the time, literally, all over the place.

Just to name two of the main streams we can see John arguing with here: Gnostics, pagans from the mystery cults that were very popular at the time who maintained that divine sparks were caught up in the material world waiting to be released so they could go "home" to heaven where they belonged and rejoin the source of all that is. To them Jesus was a mega spark, caught in a man. Causing a flash of light upon release. All they had to do was follow his example and in that way have their own sparks join his in a journey up to the highest spheres of heaven. Flesh and blood to them were per definition impure and corrupt. Things no god in their right mind would want anything to do with. And their aim was to leave this earthly body behind and enter into the spiritual realm of the beyond.

Jews were at the other end of the spectrum. They are not really very much concerned with the hereafter or the beyond. For them spirituality had to be firmly grounded in the earthly here and now of living a life of justice and peace guided by the law and supported by religious ritual. Flesh and blood to them were very much the places where religion had to happen, sacred because they were created in God's image and breathed with God's breath. They were not to be touched, precisely because they were sacred, a holy and to be hallowed part of God's creation.

The only positive way blood could be spilled was in the temple, on the altar, for God, as part of the atonement sacrifice. Blood was for God, because it was thought to contain God's essence.

Other pagans believed a similar thing, but different. "You are what you eat" was something that is widely accepted as truth in many cultures then and now. The meat of cows will give you cow strength, the meat of chickens will give you chicken strength, eating brains will make you smarter. The meat of sacrifice from the temples of the gods will give you god strength. Eating Jesus will give you Jesus strength.

All of these views had their issues, none of them covered the mystery that John, and others then and long after him, have tried to put into words. That Jesus was the image of God in the Jewish sense, his flesh and blood sacred and holy. Not impure or corrupt, but a place where the divine entered nature and time and materialised. Real flesh, real blood.

That somehow Jesus' death had brought about atonement for all people in a way that, according to Leviticus, until then, had only been available to Jewish people. Atonement through sacrifice, through the spilling of blood in the temple. Detaching the opportunity to be atoned from the need to be in geographical location of the temple precinct, as well as widening it from animal sacrifices and their endless repetition, to a one off, human sacrifice that brought redemption once and for all. No need for further spilling of blood if this sacrifice, this blood, was ingested, taken in.

That chewing on the essence of what Jesus' life had been and digesting it would indeed imbibe a person with what Jesus' had been and transfer the properties of his life and essence into that other person.

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Abide. A key word in the gospel of John. Used about 40 times in the gospel. A word that designates an integration, a coming together of two entities to such an extent that it will become unclear where one ends and the other begins. A symbiosis. The vine and the branches, the leaven and the dough, the grapes in the wine. That is the extent to which Jesus' flesh and blood needs to be integrated into the lives of those who want to follow him. So they'll have eternal life.

Now there is another word that has been metaphored to death, spiritualised out of existence. *Eternal life* to John is something that happens here and now. As Christ dwells in us, as we ingest his flesh and blood, our own flesh and blood is transformed. Not because we suddenly become saints, but because we become part of him and he becomes part of us. It's not that our divine sparks are suddenly loosened from their earthy mores, on the contrary, chewing and chomping on Jesus' flesh, his blood starts to run in our veins, his words start to recreate us into people who, in this world, at this time, have changed tracks. And we become part of something that goes way beyond the here and now: eternal life.

Since my experience with the healing power of the brain I've become very interested in neuro-plasticity and what the brain can do to change itself. One of the buzz words in that field at the moment is that neurons that fire together wire together. If John had lived today he may have used that image to help his people understand what he means with indwelling and chewing on Jesus flesh in a different way. Not only Jesus' words, not only Jesus' way of being, but Jesus the man needs to become part of who we are, find his way into our neurons, so he can start wiring with every part of our bodily existence in every way possible. No limits.

A deeply intimate and spiritual experience that works itself out in a totally physical, material way of being. Taking on the flesh, transforming it, touching its very essence in a way that

recreates who we are to the most profound levels of our existence. Physically, mentally and spiritually.

What communion is to John, what he tries to put into words here, and he may be quoting Jesus, or he may not be, is that celebrating communion is not a purely spiritual exercise that helps our spiritual self connect to the divine source of all being, loosening us from the explicit, graphic, everyday reality of flesh and blood, of violence and pain, and even of joy and passion, of everything that constitutes human life, here, now, on this earth in this time, including the trauma of war, or the repulsive imagery of death and destruction.

But neither is it a purely physical exercise. It is also a celebration of community of like-minded people who have decided that sharing a bite of bread and a sip of wine is going to remind them of a special man who once lived and showed them how good living can be done in this world.

And it is a ritual that takes us to the heart of God, to the core of faith, of life as God would want it and connects us in a mysterious way to the ground of all being, to redemption, to Christ's death on the cross in a way that is beyond the rational, the physical, or the material.

It is all of the above, and all at the same time. And that is a mystery the Church, in all its history, has struggled to find words for.

The essential somehow becoming existential. Death somehow giving way to new life. Flesh somehow breathing with the essence of the divine. Pain and suffering somehow transforming itself into life-giving, peace-creating, growth against the odds, power. The graphic, offending, confronting parts of our existence somehow loved and held in the presence of God, not in some far away future eternity, but in life with an eternal quality here and now. Amen.

Links you may find useful:

On John 6:

http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2012/08/lectionary-blogging-john-6-51-58.html

http://jewsforjudaism.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48:what-is-the-major-concern-of-leviticus-1710-14&catid=43:atonement&Itemid=487

<http://www.totustuus.com/TheEucharistPart2.pdf>

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/info/john-food.html>

<http://www.bobcornwall.com/2009/08/thoughts-on-transubstantiation.html>

<http://www.preacherguy.ca/sermons/serm421.html>

<http://biblista.net/main/articles/john-651-58-my-flesh-is-real-food/>

<http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1880>

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/16/2009&tab=4

On the development of rock music:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Got_a_Woman

<http://youtu.be/IsC4cH-v3ns>

http://youtu.be/B2_zdgPYhJg,

Brain plasticity video: http://youtu.be/rCxo9GwbP_8

from Agnus day comics:

<http://www.agnusday.org/comics/101/john-651-58>

