

I Kings 19.4-8, Ephesians 4.25-5.2, John 6.35, 41-51
Sermon preached on the 12th August by The Reverend Arwen Folkes

**May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen**

Last week we thought about the bread of Life, shaping God's people through the biblical history. Today we will think about how the bread of life shapes us in the present day. To help you with this I invite you to do something different today. A priest's job is often to point upwards and outwards and today's sermon is no different.

In a while, when the Communion prayer begins, I'd like you to put down your service books and absorb the service in a new way. This may feel uncomfortable, but I am absolutely sure that many of you know the words and responses off by heart by now, and if you don't ... it's really ok to miss them for one week, to just let them work their way in through sight and sounds rather than in the written word.

Those of you who have been in high and hazy churches will know that some services of Holy Communion engage all the senses Incense appeals to the nose, bells appeal to the ears, rich colours and gestures engage the eyes which lead right up to the use of taste and touch at the altar rail. Through this sensory engagement your entire being is brought right into the present moment, the Eucharist becomes something to be lived and experienced, not just watched and regarded.

The theology behind such worship is to enter as fully as we can into the mystery of divine presence. To use the whole of you to enter what is happening at the front. It is to physically and sensually receive the full bodily presence of Christ and his dwelling amongst us and the whole of his church.

As you will watch the various movements you may notice how your eyes are guided horizontally and vertically – they will look up, look down, and look around. This isn't an accident. Holy Communion is a religious ritual which bonds us in three different ways and these guiding movements are not just some sort of secret priestly dance. They each point towards the multiple and simultaneous ways we are being bonded to Christ in the Eucharist.

When our eyes are lifted upwards we are reminded that we are being joining with Jesus Christ and so to God, that our temporality is being taken up into eternity, that the humble earthliness of the bread and the wine is made one with the heavenly bread of the saints and angels.

Yet, when our eyes look around us horizontally we also see that we are being gathered with one another and the whole church All the many separate Eucharists being celebrated right across the world, are part of that one heavenly Eucharist being presided over by the One God, through

the words and action of his One Son ... who reminds us all today that He is present as the Bread of Life.

The actions of the Mass move hearts through the senses and bypass our rationale. They speak to us in that place of faith, the imagination and the place of creativity, they open us up to perceive that we are being spoken to in the depths of our soul and the shaping of our hearts, so that we can live in a new way. We don't have to understand it, but being fully present helps us to recognise it.

Some Christians believe that it is Christ himself performing all of this through the priests holy orders. It's a very powerful idea that Christ is speaking to you directly and as you walk towards the sanctuary with hands outstretched it is Christ who gives himself to you here and now. Psalm 34 uses the phrase 'Taste and see that the Lord is Good' which is exactly what we are asked to do in the Eucharist.

Now, I know that for people unfamiliar with the church, the language of Body and Blood is quite difficult to stomach. It shocks when first encountered and takes some getting used to. Yet, when we stretch out our hands, we are expressly given 'The Body of Christ' to eat and 'The Blood of Christ' to drink.

Our Lent course this year revealed the different ways people interpret these words and I am not going to play theological or metaphysical gymnastics on the subject with you this morning. But, the one thing that Christians have in common is some understanding that Christ is present in that bread and wine and that we then receive that presence into our own bodies.

The phrase 'you are what you eat' can be helpful in understanding our practice, because Christians are all seeking to be formed more deeply into the likeness of Christ.

There are rules we can follow to help us with this ... but inevitably every one of us will break them because that is just the way of things. Deontological ethics, as a rule based morality is known, is notoriously hard. There are grey areas, loopholes, and some moral decisions don't leave enough time to first check the rule book. Such an approach also carries the risk of shaping Christ and the church to only suit our needs.

Perhaps that's why we've been given something that speaks beyond rules. A practice that non-verbally shapes and moulds our heart into a heart more like Christ's. In taking, tasting, and absorbing him into our bodies we are physically asking that God will dwell within us just as much as we seek to dwell in him. His blood flows into our blood and his body becomes one with our own.

It is a very sensory and physical way of us hearing and receiving the presence of Christ. It is in fact, a very bodily prayer. We stop being individuals and become physically and spiritually incorporated as the Body of Christ, the Church for this generation. And our hearts are shaped, we hope, into being more instinctive in living rightly.

The Eucharist isn't a single transient moment but exists in a long process of transformation. The Church is invited to look upwards, from earth to heaven, to glimpse eternity shaping her temporality. The Christian heartbeat is gradually woven into the heartbeat of God and our attempts to love enriched by his divine love given to us here today in the Bread of Life.

To become fully present, to Christ in the Eucharist, encourages us to live not by a dry set of rules but by dancing within the dance of God. The life that pulses in the body and blood of his son becomes the shaping of our hearts by his Spirit, and the Church and all her members become shaped to suit Christ, rather than vice versa.

Bonded to Christ and bonded to one another in the Bread of Life, we begin to notice a transformation in our horizontal looking around. We begin to glimpse God's will for his world and to increasingly seek the things that Christ seeks in every moment ... finding good in the darkness, looking for hope in desolation, making peace not war. We even see the injustice of falsity, the poor as blessed, the mourners as comforted.

So, when we get there put down your books and don't worry about the words.
Join Christ in being present here with the whole of your being with every sense.
Allow yourself to taste and see that the Lord is good.
And that His goodness is gifted to us in The Bread of Life - right here and right now.

Amen