

August 16, 2009

[1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14](#) [Psalm 111](#) **John 6:51-58**

Mayfield Salisbury Church, Edinburgh

Our Gospel reading is one of the great texts embedded in the centre of Christian faith. It comes just after the astonishing claim: I am the bread of life. Jesus, known or unknown, is central to the very existence of all humanity.

Then we move from the whole of creation to the particular little community seated around the table of hospitality. For this is how salvation is brought about.

⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

But nothing in community is ever simple.

⁵²Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" This tells us a bit about the original tensions: it tells us too about the community of St John: the Jews were not good news – a fateful turn in the tradition.

⁵³Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

If I were to announce this sort of thing some morning in Princes Street (say in Jenners or Macdonalds, not to say in the New Club) I should quite possibly be sectioned and carted off to a secure hospital ward for my own safety and that of the public. He goes on:

⁵⁵For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷Just 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. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever."

If further proof of insanity were required, a very respectable standard of proof is provided. But that would be to misread the scriptural text. As the lesson from I Kings makes clear, encounter with the real God is not to be pinned down in Biblical literalism. The text hovers between dream and magic. It is about reality before God, a reality which both affirms and

transforms our human reality. Solomon is granted real wisdom, real discernment. Yet the vehicle of communication is a dream. Neither Solomon nor David were exactly angels. They would probably not have passed scrutiny for nomination to the US Supreme Court, and their official expenses lists, give or take a few assassinations, would not have looked well in the Daily Telegraph.

Indeed the Johannine Christ has a rather disturbing tendency to upset our respectable meditations with this sort of observation. The climax comes with Chapter 15.

I am the True Vine. And this one too gives ministers a tough time as they sit in their studies and try to think of something substantial to say. It's worrying. God is incomprehensible, but not half as incomprehensible as the preacher, they begin to fear. I'm going to move forward to that viticultural climax. I am the real Vine. But this is not just about me, says Jesus. Don't think you can just sit back and savour the oenological colours and highlights – either literally or if you don't drink alcohol metaphorically. It's about you. You are the community centred around Jesus. Like it or not. In the Bible the vine represents, focusses attention upon Israel, upon the people of God, to whom God speaks and on whom God relies to share in his purposes. The vine was part of the staple diet, the basics, without which there could be no health. And my father is the gardener, says Jesus. The garden is the ancient symbol for paradise, the future hope of the world. God is leading the world towards a clearly shaped goal, and that goal is tied up with Jesus. Everything that I have comes to me from God, and through me to you, for you are like the branches of the vine. The community of Jesus only makes sense when it is understood in the framework of Jesus' life and work. That points us to THE basic framework for human well being, or else the whole enterprise is just not plausible any more.

Now for some fine tuning. First the bad news. Branches which bear no fruit will be cut off. Branches which do bear will be cleansed, pruned. But before we all rush around chopping off the bits which we don't like, it should perhaps be noted that only God can make that judgement. Then the good news. You have already been cleansed, pruned, brought into the service of God by the Word that I spoke to you.

We know that we don't always bear fruit, even after we've stuffed zillions of envelopes for Christian Aid or whatever. We can feel burnt out, long since zapped by compassion fatigue. But just occasionally we have heard a word from beyond, a word which helps us to relax and assures us that the game is not yet over, not over by half.

The maker's service manual continues. Remain, abide, dwell in me, as I in you. God is there, is there before us. When we knock on parish doors, or any other doors, we may not be quite as hopelessly ineffectual as we feel we are. We may not feel always entirely with God, but God is with us and that matters.

If you heed my father's commands, you will remain in my love, as I have heeded my father's commands and remain in his love. People who read car magazines tell me - though I have of course no personal experience of these secular pursuits- that manufacturers are waking up to the fact that we may be so busy listening to Classic FM on our journeys that we may not notice the danger of running into the wall of the local police station and demolishing half a dozen squad cars parked outside it - which would be a pity. And so they will offer us brake assist, to stiffen up our feeble and ill judged efforts at braking, electronic traction control, to prevent us spinning off corners, and such like goodies. Well perhaps God's love could perhaps be seen as a sort of assistance to save us from our more extreme stupidities, but much more so. And it comes as standard with our world, at no extra cost, except for the cost of the cross.

Apart from me you can do nothing. Apart from me you can do nothing. What was I going to say? Apart from me you can do nothing. That is the bottom line.

He who does not dwell in me is thrown away like a withered branch, the withered branches are heaped together, thrown on the fire and burnt. Fires and burning. What on earth does this mean? Perhaps it allows the Church of Scotland, under the famous 1921 Act, to seek a special dispensation from the European Convention on Human Rights to burn heretics, since that is a religious belief and a religious human right. Just look at the websites. A few burnings on Saturday afternoons might do as much for our marketing as the United Colours of Benetton ads once did for fashion. On the other hand...

If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask what you will, and you shall have it. Prayer and discipleship seem to go closely together here. Not every damn silly proposal will do. This is my Father's glory, that you may bear fruit in plenty, and so be my disciples. Martin Luther, who would of course have been a Scots Presbyterian if he had had that glorious opportunity, once said this. A Christian lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbour through love. That is perhaps what Christian community has been about in Mayfield Salisbury Church, is about and will be about. And that is enough. And who is my neighbour? The sort of person to whom Christ was a neighbour, in the original church of the crucified on Calvary, a truly extraordinary rendition.

As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. abide in my love. If you heed my commands, you will abide in my love, as I have heeded my father's commands and dwell in his love. In other words, Christian community is actually not just standing out there in the rain. It is participation, participation in the life of God himself /herself. It's about taking the big risk of allowing ourselves to live from faith in God. Risk assessment professionals should certainly counsel caution here. Because the way to sharing in the love of God is through sharing love with the outsider, with the outcast, to put it bluntly, as much as the insider. That is the shape of the life of Jesus. Not a romantic notion, not a form of social engineering. Just how it is.

What we have here is a vision for life together as Christians in society. Here are a few thoughts on the nature of discipleship from the works of my friend and former Glasgow colleague Norman Shanks.

If the church is going to seize its opportunities ... it is going to have to overcome the resistance to innovation, exploration and experiment, lay aside the reluctance to take risks, and put behind it the preoccupation with survival that have tended to frustrate progress thus far.... The essence of the gospel and the loving purposes of God have to do with risk, surprise, the doing of a 'new thing' , and the insight that the fullness of life is experienced only through being prepared to give it away.

That is a deeply inconvenient gospel. But there it is. It might also just turn out to be the way, the truth and the life, unvarnished, simpliciter.

And none of us, pretty obviously, are quite up to it. But God is a God not of excarnation but of incarnation. That's Trinity for you too. And so we are brought to the table of divine hospitality to be fed and to be nurtured.

Now let me come back to John 6, My flesh is real food; my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells continuously in me and I dwell in him. As the living father sent me and I live because of the father, so he who eats me shall live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven. Eating God. This is not about cannibalism – I'm sure there's not too much of that in EH9, though there are always little surprises. This is about trying to put into words what just won't go into words. This is about a closeness, a presence which perhaps can only be glimpsed in poetry and perhaps in prayer. It is about the ultimate reference of our lives, the love that reaches out and encompasses

all humanity, often against all appearances, in the complex globalised society in which we live. How exactly this relates to the untidy and often unpromising realities of daily life, in Edinburgh South or in South Saharan Africa, we honestly don't know. But this remains the promise of the Gospel. This is the bread of life, the rainbow traced through the rain, the hope of ultimate love.

If you came this way,
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from,

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to
put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice
praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the
language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is Edinburgh and nowhere. Never and always.

I am the true vine, the living water, I am the bread of life. O taste and see that the Lord is good. God bless you, and keep you.