



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Proper 15 Year B

Ephesians 5. 15-20

John 6. 51-58

Sometimes looking back it is hard to remember how things were before March 2020. After that life changed so dramatically. It wasn't long into this pandemic that our churches were closed. Communion services had to be organised in a different way from the way they had been throughout the centuries. Thanks to modern technology online services were created so that people could at least be 'present' in worship within their own homes. When churches were reopened singing was not allowed. This was necessary because of the potential spread of the virus but it was a great loss. Music could only be accompanied by small choirs or solo singing. So many people have told me just how much they missed singing. Now singing is allowed once more as things return to more normality and worship is enriched because of it.

Mum and I were in the choir at St. Leonard's for so many years and know hymns by heart. We regularly go for rides in the countryside and often sing our favourite hymns as we do so. It is, we feel, a form of informal worship and there is absolutely no doubt that our spirits are lifted by it. I think one of the great losses to worship during this pandemic has been the necessary but sad suspension of communal singing. It is integral to worship and always has been. St. Paul puts singing and praise in worship at the centre of the epistle reading for this week.

When I was a youngster I remember a book we had in school called 'Greek myths and legends,' no doubt it was carefully edited for children. But I can still remember thinking that some of the stories were pretty violent and even disturbing and that the 'gods' didn't deserve to be worshipped at all the way they behaved! The contrast between the one true God and these Greek gods struck me even then.

These new Christians had been pagans all their lives. The worship of the Greek gods and indeed Romans ones was all they had known. They had spent their lives worshipping capricious gods whom they believed had to be pacified and who were, they thought, very capable of great power fuelled by wrath.

How different is the God they now know, the God of love who came to humanity in Jesus Christ, died and was raised to save them and all who believe. St. Paul teaches of the God who cares for every one of them. The God who treats all people equally and for whom nationality or status and such does not matter. All are equal in Christ.

Now that they have turned to Christ Paul makes it clear that the old way of life, so often expressed in pagan worship, must be left behind. We saw him explaining this to them in detail in last week's passage.

Our reading for this week misses out the first part of chapter five but this is how it begins,

^{5.1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

The word 'children' is so important, yes they are young in their new faith but the real point is that God is their heavenly Father and they are inheritors and co-heirs with Christ. This would be the antithesis of their old beliefs. The aim of all Christians should be to imitate the pattern, attitudes and behaviour Jesus gave, the key being love, kindness and respect for one another. Without this unity of belief and behaviour the church is doomed to fragment and weaken.

³ 'But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving.'

Paul does not beat about the bush; these vices would have been the norm in the old way of life but must be no longer. The 'saints' or believers, must turn their back on the old behaviour and turn to Christ's way. This is the only way that is acceptable, says Paul. The Christian way of life is not easy, it wasn't then and it isn't now but Jesus is quite clear in his teaching. If you profess faith in Jesus Christ there is no room for dishonesty, greed, power seeking or anything else of the kind. Jesus goes further; love includes everyone, not just friends, family or members of your church. The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates that. It is important to keep asking, 'What would Jesus want me to do?' not 'What do I want to do?'

Jesus says 'I am the light of the world' and as John writes at the beginning of his gospel, 'What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

Paul makes this clear here,

⁸ 'For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— ⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.'

That must be their central guide, all that is 'just, right and true.' This leads us on to today's reading and Paul's opening sentence,

¹⁵ 'Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.'

Remember these people are still living in that society; their friends are still living in the old way. They have to be careful not to back slide, it would be so easy. Jesus has turned the old way on its head. The old values and behaviour are no longer acceptable. The old clothing must go and they must be re-clothed in Christ. 'Turn from sin and turn to Christ,' is the way forward. The old behaviour leads to death. Jesus, crucified and risen, has died to set humanity free and all Christians must adopt the ways of Jesus.

One of the famous sayings in the gospels is, 'The love of money is the root of all evil.' Often people have overlooked the central words, 'love of' and the meaning of the sentence becomes quite

different. Money is of vital importance and a great deal of good can be done with it, it is our attitude to it that is central. It is the same here, Paul has nothing against wine! He has a great deal against excess.

¹⁸'Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit,' Paul moves on to worship.

'but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

I think that is the most beautiful passage. Music and singing is to be integral to Christian worship as indeed it always had been in Jewish worship. The psalms have always been central to both, but we know little of melody and hymns in early Christian worship. They must have had their own hymns and chants celebrating Christ as we do now. Paul mentions them here. I wonder if the small excerpt just prior to our passage is an example of one,

'Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,

and Christ will shine on you.'

Singing in worship has always been vitally important. Sometimes we sing hymns and just like the melody but their role is not to entertain. Hymns are integral to worship. The words themselves are chosen to tell us of God's love, of the life of Jesus, of theology. Sometimes it is useful to read through a hymn and use it as a prayer. To stop and think of each word, each verse. I remember doing a Lent course and I realised that the topic dealt with each week was reflected in the verses of the version of the hymn 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus' we have in our hymn book. We said the verse that illustrated each topic at the end of each session as a final prayer.

As with poems, hymns can use rich imagery that enables truths and aspects of faith to be expressed more deeply and profoundly than perhaps we could ourselves. Think of some hymns, just read them and so often they teach us so much of our faith. Some are based on biblical passages, 'At the name of Jesus' is based on one of my favourites from Philippians 2. This passage may have been an early Christian 'hymn.' Singing is so central to worship, the very act of singing lifts our minds and hearts to God in prayer. Also we are doing it together. It is then a form of communion. That is why Paul talks of, 'making melody in your hearts.' It can be and should be a deeply spiritual experience.

Now once again, singing is allowed in churches and Christians can make melody in fellowship with one another once more.

Our passage from St. John's gospel follows directly from last week's passage and we are told exactly where it happened. ^{6.59}'He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.' The crowds who were fed with the bread and fishes demand further signs on demand. They have to learn that this is not the point at all, that signs are just what they say, pointers to God and Jesus as his Son. Jesus is teaching them that he is the true bread from heaven. Moses was God's agent, only it was God who sent the manna in the wilderness. Jesus is himself of God, he is 'the word made flesh.' We must remember these words from the beginning of John's gospel because they directly link to chapter 6. John's whole aim is to show Jesus' divinity.

Jesus makes the startling and profound statement.

⁵¹'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Those who ate the manna in the wilderness at the Exodus died but those who eat of the true bread, Jesus, will have eternal life. Jesus has talked of being marked with the seal of God. He is being very clear here, he is the Messiah. John links the passage right back to the beginning of his gospel where at the very start he states Jesus' divinity.

^{1.14} 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'

We can see how startling these words spoken by Jesus would be for the crowd.

⁵² 'The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'

Then Jesus goes further,

⁵³ 'So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.'

Jews are forbidden by law to consume anything containing blood, this is from Leviticus 17.

¹² 'Therefore I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood,' There are strict laws governing kosher butchering so that no blood remains in the animal. Consuming blood would be anathema to them.

We can understand why the Jews were so shocked. Here is this man saying he is of God, and then saying 'eat my flesh and drink my blood!' What on earth can he mean? Anyway, they think, we know him, he is the carpenter from Nazareth, Joseph's son! Just what is going on here? They must think.

We can understand their confusion. However we must read this in the light of John's aim in his gospel. He is showing Christ's divinity, Jesus is from God, of God, 'the word made flesh.' John is referring to the Last Supper and the breaking of bread as John's readers would have understood. This is a direct reference to the Eucharist. Apparently the word, 'eat' as used by Jesus and in the Greek of John's gospel does literally mean 'chew' we do eat his 'flesh and drink his blood' in the bread and the wine at the Eucharist.

John does not relate the institution of the Eucharist at Jesus' last meal with his disciples as do the writers of the other three gospels but it infuses all his writing never more than here.

We need to compare Jesus' words in the passage here with the account of the Last Supper when Jesus explains to his disciples just what his impending death means. The Passover meal celebrates God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The blood of the lamb that was sacrificed saved the Israelites from death.

Jesus states quite clearly that he is the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'

This is from Luke's gospel; the words of Jesus are used in the service of communion.

'he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' Jesus is giving his life for humanity. His body will be broken and his blood shed on the cross at Calvary. His sacrifice will be of himself. The word made flesh will give that flesh for us and by doing so he will win salvation and eternal life for all believers, eternal life now, when we die and in the new created order at the Last Day.

Jesus gives the command, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' His followers down the ages have done exactly that at the Eucharist. There we make the 'remembrance of his death and Passion,' his body broken and his blood shed in love for humanity.

This is the depth of Christ's love for us.

⁵⁷ 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.'

This is Jesus' promise to us. Those who believe in me who obey my commands who share in communion with me will have eternal life. Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness Jesus, the true 'bread from heaven' gives eternal life.

Now this is where our gospel passage links to the passage from Ephesians. God cannot be fooled. A Christian cannot not simply say, 'I believe in Christ,' and that's it. No Paul says, your behaviour must be attuned to the way of Christ. It's the same for us, you can't simply be confirmed, receive communion and think that is all that is needed and go your own way. No, Jesus is very clear as is Paul; you must live in Christ's way to receive the fullness of God's grace. Christianity is two way, Jesus gave all in love for us; we must respond, a Christian must truly turn to him and allow God's Holy Spirit to fill our lives. Our lives must be lived according to his teaching.

We are a part of God's new creation which he will establish in the fullness of time. We must act as people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and truly follow Jesus.

Every time we take Holy Communion we are in union with Jesus in a very special way and in union with one another. We remember just how much his love for us cost and thank God for the freedoms he won for us.

Stand up stand up for Jesus, who reigns as King of kings. Be ready for the challenge of faith his kingship brings. Christ's love has set us free, he conquered death forever and lives eternally.

Jean Holloway.

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