



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 12th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 16 Year B

Ephesians 6. 10-20

John 6. 56-69

Our gospel passage from John follows directly from last week in fact a few of the verses overlap to give continuity. It begins, ⁵⁶ 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.' The passages from chapter six deal with Jesus as divine and human. They link directly to the Eucharist where we make the 'memorial of his saving passion,' when we 'eat his body and drink his blood' in the bread and the wine of communion. This is what I wrote last week and I quote it because our passage is integral to it.

'Jesus gives 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 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.'

Jesus links this directly to the Exodus. The manna in the wilderness was sent by God, Jesus is from God and he is the living bread. Those who ate the manna died, those who believe in Jesus, who are infused with his Holy Spirit will live eternally.

'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.'

The crowds, who had miraculously been fed with the few loaves and fishes, had followed Jesus and the disciples. We know that Jesus is continuing and developing his discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum. We learn more,

⁶⁰ 'When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' Many of those he is talking to are referred to as 'his disciples.' As we see later this does not mean the twelve. Jesus obviously has many followers who are not just part of the crowd who have come to see signs or who are in need of a cure. These are people who see something different in this young teacher; who recognise that he speaks with a new kind of 'authority,' yet, as we have seen last week, this discourse of Jesus' is too much for many of them.

Of course it is complicated. The words 'eat my flesh and drink my blood,' specifically the latter would have been difficult to understand, let alone accept given a literal understanding and in the light of the strict Jewish law.

⁶¹'But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?'

This reminds me very much of the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus as told in John 3,

'Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'

These 'disciples, like Nicodemus recognise something of God in Jesus. Indeed Nicodemus is a teacher of the Law and educated and is attracted by Jesus. He of all people should be able to understand.

'Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.'

Nicodemus sees things on a literal level. Jesus understands not only his lack of understanding but also his lack of faith, it is all too much for Nicodemus to comprehend let alone believe and he leaves.

'If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

This paragraph is so similar to the passage in our reading where Jesus says,

⁶²'Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?'

Jesus is referring to his divinity and specifically to the incarnation. This is what John intends us to understand from both passages. John begins his gospel with the incarnation.

^{1.1} 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...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.'

I know that I have quoted this passage before but it is integral to John's message. The whole of his gospel is infused with it. The word 'flesh' links these passages inextricably. In today's passage Jesus is talking specifically of his incarnation. ⁶³ 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.'

Jesus has warned the crowd not to demand signs; he reprimands them for following him because they think they might be fed again. Bodily food is not the point. He is the 'Bread from heaven' Jesus is human but he is also divine, the Spirit of God is within him he gives the spiritual food of eternal life. Jesus' home is both heaven and earth, the 'Word made flesh.' Flesh on its own is nothing but Jesus, as God incarnate, is infused with 'the life of God'. Jesus makes it clear that it is the embodied Spirit. John is at pains to stress the wonder of the incarnation, that God 'dwelt among us full of grace and truth.'

Jesus is God and man. That was a step too far for many of his followers, so they drifted away.

⁶⁴ 'But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.'

Jesus knows the hearts of people; he knows who will not accept him, who in fact will turn their back on God. Think of the antithesis of this, the figure in the painting 'The Last Supper' who strains forward to Jesus, the figure is said to be St. John.

⁶⁵ 'And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

This does not mean that only the chosen ones can come to Jesus, Jesus comes to all humanity, God's grace is freely given, but Jesus seems to be aware of what is in people's hearts, of the choices they will make. God does not impose himself on us. The crowd have a choice: they have freewill and they choose to walk away.

They have turned their back on God and the enormity of that is staggering. Paul will pick up this theme of good and evil in the passage from Ephesians. The people in the crowd have chosen their own way, not God in Jesus. Jesus turns to the twelve; it is a challenge, a test of their faith, We can imagine that scene, the crowds barely a few yards away from him, maybe some looking back in doubt yet going in the end. As they disappear Jesus turns to the twelve, their eyes meet and in that moment he searches their hearts, 'Do you also wish to go away?'

It is Simon Peter who answers for them all. Peter's complete faith in Jesus' teaching and in who Jesus is, is encapsulated in his words,

⁶⁸ 'Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Our passage ends with this triumphant acclamation which echoes Peter's 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.' Jesus is God incarnate; he gives salvation and eternal life.

These men have turned to Christ and upon them he will build the foundation which will become the Christian church.

Our passage from Ephesians deals with the fledgling church. It does not follow on from last week, just prior to this Paul has dealt with relationships, wives and husbands, children, slaves and masters. He does not try to turn the ways of the world on their head but one thing that he does insist on in this long passage is mutual respect and the treatment of people according to the ways of Christ. Really our passage for today follows on from the earlier passages from Ephesians that we have been studying. Paul is making it clear that the old ways that they were used to in their civilisation are no longer acceptable. Now these young Christians have accepted Jesus, have 'turned from sin and turned to Christ' they must turn away from the old way of life acceptable when they worshipped pagan gods and they must embrace the God of Love. Their lives must reflect the teachings of Jesus.

Paul is aware of the dangers of worshipping God in a pagan society whose ways are alien now. These Christians will probably suffer persecution even death and they must be prepared for that.

Remember Paul is writing the epistle to the Ephesians from prison as is the case with many of his letters. He understands persecution first hand. He knows about the power of good in the one true God and Jesus, 'the word made flesh' and the powers of evil in the world ranged against goodness. The image of 'the armour of God' has become famous in literature, prayers and of course hymns. We think of hymns such as 'Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armour on' and the hymn, 'Be thou my vision' which is a translation from 8th century Irish and is no doubt based on St Patrick's breast plate. St. Paul's is a powerful image. It is not easy to write about perfect images! If you look at the topics covered they are the essence of aspects of Christian faith. Ephesus was part of the Roman Empire; these soldiers would be a part of daily life. The conquered populations of the Roman Empire would understand Paul's image.

I remember when I was teaching, a friend of mine had made a life sized model Roman soldier; he emerged yearly whenever 'The Romans' were on the curriculum. He was a legionary in full armour. He was very impressive and a great teaching aid. I can't help thinking of him when I read this passage.

The Roman armour was designed primarily for defence, to protect a soldier from the weapons of the attacker. In this case Paul uses the image of 'the whole armour of God' to protect the Christian against the forces of evil wherever they are found.

¹⁰ 'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God,' This armour is God's armour. Paul does not simply say, you will face persecution and possibly execution at the hands of rulers, he goes much further. Protection is needed 'so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.'

What Paul is stating here is that they have ranged themselves with the power of good, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, God the Father. But against them are powers of evil. Yes that will be rulers, authorities, those who hold temporal sway and who act evilly, but it is more than that. Evil is a force which humans choose to adopt, the powers of evil use humans as a vehicle. Evil here is seen as a cosmic power.

Thinking of evil is not very popular; people tend to belittle it, creating a caricature in the form of the Devil with horns etc. That is as ridiculous as reducing the creator of all that is to a figure on a cloud with a harp!

The power of evil is monumental and it always has been. We see it everywhere, every time we look at the news there are monstrous examples of evil at work.

It is subtler than that too; we all have the capacity for good or evil within us. This has been examined in numerous books notably Golding's 'Lord of the Flies'. Evil is always present. Our job is to fight against it. We all make choices between right and wrong every day.

Paul could not be more specific. The cosmic force of evil is ever present. So then,

¹³ 'Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.'

The armour Paul describes is mostly for protection and the metaphor is superb as he describes many aspects of our Christian faith. The best way to explain that would be to look at this hymn,

'Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armour on, strong in the strength that God supplies through his eternal Son.'

¹⁴ 'Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist,'

The word 'stand' is echoed in hymns like 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus,' Christians are required to stand firm for Jesus against all that is wrong. The belt is the thing that holds all together and the 'belt of truth' Paul puts at the centre. This means the fundamental truth of the gospel of Christ. All that we have received through Christ is true and our belief in this gospel holds everything together. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John, chapter 8.

Some of these words have a secondary meaning in that they are basic human values. The secondary meaning here is truth in behaviour and speech. This is the antithesis of Pilate's 'What is truth?'

There is only one truth. The Christian must not manipulate or bend the truth to what they want.

Christian truth is absolute. Expediency must have no place within the Christian's life or the life of the church. Christians must stand firm for what is right.

The next aspect of the faith is righteousness

'and put on the breastplate of righteousness.' This reminds me of the verse from Amos 5.24

²⁴ 'But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

This is part of the Christian's defence. Never waver in doing what is just, what is right and what is true. We all know what this is according to the teaching of Christ. Goodness is integral to this. God is goodness and his new creation, founded in Christ will establish justice, truth and righteousness on earth once and for all. The Christian must believe in the teaching of Jesus Christ and live in his way.

'Love God and love one another as I have loved you' must be their guide in all things. Human beings may persecute, may destroy the body but they cannot touch the souls united to Christ. The righteous God who is judge of all will in Jesus Christ establish his new creation which has been begun in Jesus and should be lived by each Christian.

So many people expected a Messiah who was a conqueror; who would destroy the invaders through war and establish God's Kingdom. Jesus is a warrior though of a very different sort. He will fight the ultimate battle with the powers of evil at Calvary. He will win through the power of love and peace. Peace is the central message of Christ.

¹⁵ 'As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.'

Without shoes you can't stand and the shoes are fundamental to being able to function. So the gospel of peace is central to everything you do. Do whatever you need to boldly proclaim Christ and his teaching. This is not just about defence against evil; shoes are equipped people to be active, to take out Christ's message of love. We need to remember this. There is no room for hostility, where that is evil is getting a hold. It is up to us to fight against wrong wherever we find it, not to collude with it because it is the easiest option. The oft quoted, 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,' is in fact quite true. It is something we all need to remember.

Armour's function is mainly protection and defence. Belief in Jesus Christ is defence, protection against evil. Central to armour is the shield that can ward off blows and attacks of any kind.

¹⁶ 'With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.'

For Paul it is faith that is the ultimate protection. It is faith in Christ which will enable you to stand fast against any attack. Attacks may come in the form of cruelty from other people in the form of

persecution, but equally it may be ill health, depression, or sadness. The list is endless. Steadfast belief that Jesus walks with you in your trouble will see you through. This in itself is a huge topic and it is worth reflecting on maybe in relation to your own life and experiences.

Finally,

¹⁷ 'Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.'

The head is the most important part of the body; it is protected by the helmet. Here the helmet is Salvation. Know that whatever happens, belief in Jesus Christ and life lived in his way means that you have been saved. Jesus won salvation for us by giving his life to set us free. Whatever evil does to the Christian it cannot touch this eternal gift of Christ.

The only weapon in this long list is the 'sword of the Spirit which is the word of God' Indeed this is the gospel of Jesus Christ which we take out into the world. The powers of evil have suffered a serious defeat at Calvary. Now the Christian must expect a renewed attack so be prepared for that, is Paul's message. Do not be surprised either if evil gets a hold in the most unlikely places. The church is vulnerable to infiltration by evil. Guard against it. That is indeed what the early church faced as indeed do Christians now. The gospel of Christ, lived in our lives will defeat evil.

The final passage is about prayer. Weapon is not the right word for prayer; it is the means of communication with God, our loving Father. It is a strong protection against evil. 'God is with us, we will not be afraid' is a lovely phrase I use regularly. Paul knows how vital prayer is and that it should be a constant comfort to us. Prayer is communion with our Father.

¹⁸ 'Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.'

Paul puts unity at the centre, 'pray for the saints' or pray for each other. Unity is the key to withstanding an assault, both unity with the Father and unity within his church is central, all that is grounded in love.

We know how important prayer is, Jesus constantly prayed to his Father. Think of Gethsemane when the powers of evil were all around trying to get him to shy away from Calvary, 'His sweat was as great drops of blood.' Jesus was triumphant, evil was defeated. Jesus' disciples say, 'teach us to pray,' Jesus gives us the 'Lord's prayer.' It is good to go through that slowly and thoughtfully. Paul knows there is nothing more powerful than prayer.

So we return to the beginning, to Paul in prison.

¹⁹ 'Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.'

Paul is fighting his own battle against evil; he is fighting in the power and strength of Christ. Here in prison he is still doing the will of God by proclaiming the gospel of Christ. He asks for prayer from the newly established churches to sustain and comfort him.

We pray to God our Father knowing that he is with us always. We meet Jesus in a special way at the Holy Communion and we thank him for his love for us.

'Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight, be though my armour be thou my true might, be thou my soul's shelter and though my high tower. Raise though me heavenward O power of my power.' Irish, 8th century trans. Mary Byrne and Eleanor Hull

