

In a week's time we will gather here around the Lord's Table to celebrate communion together.

When people first worshipped here, the celebration of the sacrament on Sunday would have been part of a five day Communion season, with services of humiliation, examination, preparation, commemoration and thanksgiving being held daily from Thursday to Monday.

I'm not sure how long that tradition continued in this congregation – whether some of you may remember some vestiges of that pattern of preparation and celebration from your younger days.

Sermons at every service, and three during the Communion service, is not a tradition that I feel in a hurry to revive, but accounts I have read of the Communion season¹ celebrations highlight the communal nature of the event, the opportunities it gave for people to meet together over meals as well as in services of worship and to speak together of the signs of God's grace in their lives.

Over the past 5 weeks we have been reading through John 6, which began with the feeding of the 5000. John does not include the institution of the Lord's Supper in his account of the final Passover meal Jesus ate with his disciples. But in this chapter we hear the discussions between Jesus and those who had received bread from him:

Jesus talks about himself as the bread of life², the bread that comes down from heaven³, the living bread. The crowds talk about the manna from heaven that fed their ancestors in the wilderness⁴ – and Jesus says “I am the bread of life”.

Last week we read: “.. the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”⁵

There is still quite a way to go in this story before Jerusalem and the cross, but when I read those words my mind goes straight to “This is my body broken for you – do this in remembrance of me.”⁶ There are echoes of Communion here.

Today we hear Jesus say, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”⁷

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table next week, how might these words sound to us?

Eating and drinking are the source of physical life for us – without nourishment we will die. Our lives depend on eating and drinking. As we eat and drink, what we consume becomes part of who we are, becomes the fuel for our bodies, is incorporated into our physical being.

So Jesus is to be the source of our life, the one on whom our life depends, the one who becomes part of us, incorporated into our very being.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

Eating flesh and drinking blood – could Jesus have been any more offensive if he'd tried? No wonder those who heard him said “This is a hard saying – a difficult saying.” To Jewish ears these words were utterly offensive, blasphemous, in direct contravention of the Law. Eating flesh was forbidden. It was associated with vultures and evildoers. Drinking blood was equally offensive. “You shall not eat flesh with its life - that is, its blood,” says Genesis. “You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off,” says Leviticus.⁸ That is why kosher meat, ritually 'clean' and fit to eat, has had the blood drained out of it. To flout this law meant being cut off from God forever.

But the reason for the prohibition against eating flesh with the blood wasn't because it was dirty, but because it was holy – dedicated to God. When an animal was sacrificed, the blood was always given to God. Usually it was directly poured onto the altar. Why? Because God considered it holy. And God considered it holy because it was the blood of the animal that embodied its very life.

Because God is the giver of all life, life is holy. Life is sacred. And it's not to be misused or mistreated -

1 <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/worship/the-scottish-communion-season.php>;

<http://www.gracemagazine.org.uk/articles/geoffthomas/stornaway.htm>

2 John 6:35

3 John 6:51

4 John 6:31

5 John 6:51

6 1 Corinthians 11:24

7 John 6:56

8 Leviticus 17:14

and certainly not consumed. It belongs to God, and God alone.

So, when Jesus says that his followers are to drink his blood, what he's saying in the ancient language of Leviticus is: take my life, and pour it into your bodies, your lives. And by pouring his eternal-life-blood into our life, we then are the recipients of eternal life ourselves. Because Jesus' life is coursing in our veins, nourishing our life.⁹

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

But many of those who followed him found this just too much - "This teaching is difficult – who can accept it?"¹⁰

They were the many who had been attracted to him, many who had become fascinated by him, many who had been ready to listen to him and follow him. So far following Jesus had been easy and exciting - he had been performing signs and wonders, successfully challenging the authorities, and giving people the hope that "this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."¹¹

But now the teaching is hard, now they begin to complain – to murmur, just as the Israelites had murmured in the wilderness.

Do we find some of Jesus' teaching is difficult, hard to swallow? What do we do then?

Jesus asked those who murmured "Does this offend you?" Is this a scandal for you - a stumbling block? Does this get in the way? Does this make you say "That's it – I've had enough – thus far but no further." Do you also wish to go away?

Next week we will come to the Lord's Table, and share together in the meal, receiving the body and blood of Jesus (however we understand that), sharing one loaf, one cup as a sign that we are one body.

And yet our meal together at the Lord's Table has become a hard thing, a difficult thing for some of you, I know. Some have spoken to me or to Tokerau directly about how difficult you are finding it. We have been told that there others who also struggle, with different languages, and with the loss of the familiar.

And although we have tried to listen well, some of you have been offended, I believe, feeling that your concerns have not been met.

"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."¹² That was an option that people took – to turn back, to go away. Jesus was not able to satisfy all who followed him – many found that they were getting nothing but offense from his words. So they no longer went about with him.

And then Jesus turned to the Twelve, those whom he had called, who had been closest to him, and asked them, "Do you also want to go away?"¹³

And Peter said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life"¹⁴.

Even when those words are difficult, even when you ask us to move so far out of our comfort zone, even when you take the things we believed we knew and understood about God and life and the proper way of doing things, and turn them on their head. Even then – your words are the words of eternal life

When we come to the Lord's Table, we come to share in the sacrament. That's a word that comes from Latin *sacramentum* - the oath of loyalty sworn by a Roman soldier. Swearing the *sacramentum* changed the status of the man entirely. He became utterly subject to his general's authority, and had put aside any restraints of his former civilian life. His actions would be governed by the will of the general. Now he was a soldier, and had pledged his loyalty.¹⁵

So when we come to the Lord's Table to share in the sacrament, we come to renew our oath of loyalty to Jesus Christ, the promises made at our baptism and confirmation. We come to commit ourselves again to

9 Rick Morley, "The bloody truth"; <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1880>

10 John 6:60

11 John 6:14

12 John 6:66

13 John 6:67

14 John 6:68

15 <http://www.roman-empire.net/army/becoming.html>

follow Jesus and to live his way.

The picture we have in Ephesians 6 of the 'whole armour of God' reminds us of this link with the soldier's oath or *sacramentum*. Paul pictures the Christian life in terms of a battle, not against human beings, but against the powers, the forces of evil that are active in human systems and power structures, and opposed to God's realm of peace and love and justice and compassion. These are the forces that divide, that create barriers, that discriminate, that set people against each other.¹⁶

The power that can overcome such forces is the power of God, the strength that God supplies.

What is God's power like? Looking back through Ephesians, we have seen that God's power is about reconciliation and love, the overcoming of barriers between people so that people come together in peace and hope.

It is in the power of God, the power of love and reconciliation, that the call comes to put on God's armour. This armour is God's, given to strengthen us so that our lives and words provide a strong defense from any attempt to derail our journey with Jesus. We do not have to lash out when we focus on truth, peace, and faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ. We can feel safe and secure in the power of the Life-giver. Dissent, anger, and violent attacks, whether spiritual and physical, are not who we are as Christians. We are not supposed to initiate conflict. Rather we live according to the words of Jesus defended by truth, righteousness, faith, peace, salvation and the good news of God's love. We are reconcilers and peacemakers, not the source of conflict and war. We are truth tellers, not liars. We have faith in the saving grace of Jesus Christ, not in the egos and false claims of humanity. And we know above all that we are strengthened by the same God who is the source of life, not by the weakness of finite and imperfect human beings¹⁷.

“Put on the gospel armour – each piece put on with prayer” - so the old hymn went.¹⁸

Just as our forebears prepared themselves to come to the Lord's Table, so let's pray for ourselves and for one another, as we prepare to celebrate the sacrament next week.

Pray that we will come to the sacrament ready to renew our oath of loyalty to Christ.

Pray that as we receive bread and wine, we may eat his bread and drink his blood, taking Jesus' life into our own, so that we abide in him and he in us.

Pray that as we hear again Jesus' question: “Do you also wish to go away?” we will be able to share Peter's response: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

16 W.Loader, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost13.html>

17 Liz Zivanov, <http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=1115>

18 *Stand up, stand up for Jesus*, George Duffield