

JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

SUNDAY, 26 August 2018 (Trinity 13)

ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

John 6: 56-69
Ephesians 5: 10-20

The Bank Holiday weekend at the end of August, in the secular calendar, is usually thought to be a time to relax, to wind down, to go on holiday and to enjoy the last of the summer wine.

But today's New Testament readings make no concessions to such earthly pleasures. Indeed it would be hard to find in all Scripture two more demanding wake up calls designed to put God's faithful people on their mettle.

The Gospel passage from John 6 is particularly challenging and not only to us today. It really upset Jesus's original hearers in the Synagogue of Capernaum.

"This teaching is difficult who can accept it?" they grumbled.

Some translations of the Bible use harsher adjectives than difficult, such as:

This is a hard teaching or this is an offensive teaching.

Indeed some of those original hearers were so offended that they walked out and rejected Jesus.

As John puts it, "Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him".

So what was upsetting them so much?

Certainly Jesus's language must have seemed extraordinary.

Was his imagery suggesting that his followers should become gory cannibals by eating his flesh and breaking the sacred Jewish law against consuming blood?

Of course not. That would be "disgusting" – the word used last Sunday by Father Stuart Munns who preached on this same passage.

As some of you may have noticed the Lectionary has rather surprisingly repeated the same Gospel Reading for the second Sunday running – presumably because the compilers think that it is so important – which it is, because it takes us to the heart of the meaning of our Mass today.

To grasp its importance we have to understand that there is no easy soft option here. We cannot explain away our Lord's words as cozy metaphors or similes as some liberal theologians like to do.

That's because Jesus was careful not to let his hearers think that his teaching could be interpreted as mere symbolism.

Or that his language about eating and drinking his flesh and his blood could mean a non-physical event confined to our spiritual imaginations.

We can't go down this easy road because John insists here, as indeed Paul does in I Corinthians 11, that the eating and drinking means actual physical eating and drinking.

John, writing in Greek uses a word for 'eat' which was solidly physical, meaning something like 'munch' or 'chew' or 'bite' in our language.

So this is indeed a difficult teaching until we relate it to the Eucharist in which we will soon all be participating.

Although John 6 does not directly refer to the Eucharist he explains the meaning of the Lord's Supper as clearly as any passage in Scripture.

Today when we eat the bread and drink the wine we should keep in mind Our Lord's precise words as recorded by John in verse 56 of our reading:

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

Of all the theologians down the centuries who have interpreted this passage from Augustine onwards, none have portrayed it in more majestic and meaningful language than Thomas Cranmer when he wrote the Prayer of Humble Access in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer for the Communion Service.

This is a prayer that has been used for centuries at Communion Services in the Church of England. Indeed it is used here at St Matthew's at the 8am BCP Service every Sunday morning.

Let me quote Cranmer's great words:

"Grant us therefore gracious Lord so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood and that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us."

I am relieved but not surprised that no-one has walked out this morning after hearing this benign and beautiful interpretation of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus means.

When we come to the altar for our Eucharist today perhaps we should ponder on what it means to dwell in him and he in us.

As we know life with Jesus is not all green pastures and quiet waters. There are challenges too.

Thomas À Kempis hit the nail on the head when he wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*:

“Many follow Jesus unto the breaking of the bread but few unto the drinking of the cup of his Passion”.

Perhaps all of us like the idea in sharing the benefit of the life dwelling in Jesus, but are we also willing to share in the struggle and suffering of his passion?

This question brings us to St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. When he wrote the passage we heard this morning he was clearly in the middle of a struggle, indeed a battle of suffering.

His imagery is that of spiritual warfare, and he uses a sustained military metaphor.

Paul mentions The Belt, the breastplate, the soldier’s shoes, the shield, the helmet, the sword –

“Put on the whole armour of God” he urges us.

But why is all this martial equipment needed?

Who is the battle against?

It has become rather too fashionable in today’s world of half-hearted mealy mouthed Christianity to ignore the forces of evil,

to pretend that the devil is some sort of cartoonish character with horns and a tail who we needn’t take seriously.

That’s not the position of Paul, nor should it be the position of anyone who is in Jesus words in today’s Gospel “abides in me”.

Perhaps there is a clue at the end of this passage as to why Paul used such strong language.

He asked the Ephesians to pray for him that he can “make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains”.

This is an historical reminder he was chained up or in today’s criminal vernacular “banged up” in a prison. This letter to the Ephesians is one of

Paul's Prison epistles – and all the more powerful because it was written when he was behind bars.

The morning after I was ordained as a Deacon just 58 days ago I said in my first sermon here at St Matthew's that my principal vocation lay in serving as a Prison Chaplain.

So I now do regular duty as a Prison Chaplain in HMP Pentonville, notorious among its inmates as being "a tough nick".

On the wings of a tough nick, you very soon become aware of the spiritual battle between good and evil.

As in any prison there are frequent confrontations between these two forces.

On the one hand there are plenty of good decent people who cope well with the pressures of jail by managing to love their sometimes unloveable neighbours.

These good people include prison officers who offer their charges small acts of kind encouragement.

Prison nurses who care with compassion for the physically and mentally ill.

Teachers in the prison education department who offer hope to the sub literate and those with special needs.

Staff members who defuse potentially explosive confrontations with deft touches of humanity and humour.

Among the prisoners too – for all their mistakes and crimes – there are many good people who extend the hand of friendship and the milk of human kindness to their fellow inmates on the wing.

But alas there are some situations in which it is easy to see what Paul called "the Wiles of the Devil" at work.

Let me give you an eye witness. Last Tuesday I was present in the mosque inside Pentonville prison at a celebration of one of Islam's great festivals Eid Al Adha.

It was a tense overcrowded gathering on a hot day.

Maybe some of the inmates were so frustrated at having been 'banged up' in their cells for over an extended weekend that they felt like copycatting the violence that had been reported from HMP Birmingham last week.

Maybe some of them had been taking Spice or other drugs.

Maybe there were feuds between rival gangs.

But for whatever reason the mood in the mosque suddenly turned ugly. Fists flew, punch ups broke out in at least five or six places. It was a serious enough disturbance to start alarm bells pealing and officers running from all parts of the jail.

But then in a restrained operation that was greatly to their credit specialist officers went in with a minimum of force and removed the trouble makers.

This operation was more like a ballet than a bust up.

I was impressed by this gentle exercise of authority, particularly by the man in command of it, the Duty Governor who contributed to the restoration of calm by shaking many of the peaceful worshippers by the hand and wishing them Eid Mubarak, the traditional Eid greeting.

But before peace and prayer could replace fighting the Imam had to speak out bluntly.

"Shame on you", he cried. "The Devil has got into some of you".

Now that courageous Iman was not afraid to use the blunt language of Spiritual Warfare – not all that different from Paul's language to the Ephesians – in order to confront a nasty situation which was clearly a clash between the forces of good and evil.

But let's not overdramatise this situation because Spiritual Warfare is not confined to prisons.

The Devil operates all around us in everyday life.

Sometimes he even tempts preachers!

My favourite true story about the Devil and a preacher concerns one of my heroes, the Reverend John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace, Glorious Thing of Thee Are Spoken* and other fine hymns.

One Sunday Newton was preaching at his home Church at St Mary Woolnoth in the City of London and he felt rather too pleased with himself for delivering an exceptionally good sermon. But fortunately he realised that he was being tempted by the sin of pride, and so he checked himself just in the nick of time.

This was just as well because as he came down from his pulpit an excited parishioner rushed up to flatter him and said,

"Mr Newton, Congratulations. That was a brilliant sermon".

"Sir", replied Newton, "The Devil told me that himself a few moments ago".

That is a humorous reminder that from pulpits to prisons, spiritual conflict is often with us.

So how do we protect ourselves from "the wiles of the devil?"

How do we fight the good fight on the right side of the continuing struggle between good and evil?

"Be strong in the Lord", advised Paul in his letter to the Ephesians.

But where should our strength come from?

When we eat the bread and drink the wine this morning, let us gain strength from knowing we are in the presence of the Holy One of God.

As we pray to him to dwell in us so that we may dwell in him.

This is the message of today's Gospel and the meaning of the Eucharist.

Amen.