

**Sermon for Eleventh Sunday after Trinity by The Reverend Colin James**  
**All Saints Church Wokingham - 12 August 2018**  
John 6.41-51

We all know that John's gospel is very different from the other three. One of the differences is that John develops a number of major themes. Another is that he does more than record Jesus' sayings and actions. He also includes two mighty "set pieces". In these he pulls together extensive discourses which can hardly have been delivered in one go, as they appear in our Bible. His hearers would surely have had no chance of following all that Jesus was telling them. No, these are the writer's distillations of Jesus' teaching given over a number of occasions. And they're meant to be read and re-read and pondered over by the early Christians for whom the author constructed them at the end of the first century.

John places the second of these mighty discourses after the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his arrest. It covers four whole chapters, totalling 115 verses. But of course that's not the one we're looking at this morning. Today we're half way through our five-Sunday journey covering the seventy-one verses of chapter six. Together they present us with that most vital of Jesus' teachings, that he is the Bread of Life. That remains very prominent in today's passage. But it's not actually what I want to concentrate on now. Here Jesus doesn't just say, "I am the bread". He adds, "that came down from heaven."(41)

The contrast between heaven and earth, between "up" and "down", "above" and "below" is one of John's most essential themes, running throughout his gospel. It's something explored in great depth in a remarkable book called "Water into Wine" by the late Bishop Stephen Verney. Speaking of Jesus' belonging to both the heavenly and earthly realms, Verney says, "The words in which John tells the story are so charged with the twofold meaning of an earthly event which is heavenly, and a heavenly event which is earthly, that they are like wires that are charged with electricity which one is afraid to touch for fear of getting a shock."(77)

In Jesus we see heaven and earth united in a single life. Of course his contemporaries could hardly be expected to recognise this, let alone understand it. They could see "the son of Joseph". (42) But they were far from seeing the long promised son of David. Nor could they grasp that this man, however extraordinary a prophet he was turning out to be, could ever be thought of as God. In spite of Isaiah's prophecy of the future coming of Emmanuel, meaning God with us,(7.14) the Jews expected God to send them a human Messiah, not to visit them in person.

Jesus' human life was so totally imbued with God's being that he could say, "The Father and I are one."(Jn 10.30) And that was way beyond their comprehension. And let's be honest, it's beyond ours too. If we Christians believe it, it's not because we understand it. It's because Jesus teaches us to accept it, as we accept him. We do so in faith and trust. For twenty centuries billions of people have responded to his

call to follow him, and thus we have discovered for ourselves that we can indeed trust him.

But when we try to apply our minds to understanding all this, we're not helped by the fact that the language of the Bible belongs to an age very different from our own. It reflects a view of the universe we've long since abandoned. No-one now thinks that heaven is a place physically located somewhere above the earth we inhabit. Or that somewhere in the "nether regions", wherever they might be, there's a place called "hell". Earlier generations, and certainly Jesus himself, had been brought up to believe all this. So it's not surprising that their language, and his, reflected such a view.

John's gospel is full of statements which assume what used to be called a "three decker universe", that is heaven on top, then the world and underneath that, hell. Here are just some of them:

Jesus says to Nathaniel, "You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."(1.51)

John the Baptist (or is it the gospel writer?) says, "The one who comes from above is above all."(3.31)

Jesus says to the people, "You are from below, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world." (8.23)

It'd be easy to find many more examples of this spatial language, of "up there" and "down here". What we need to get hold of is that John (and Jesus) are not talking about places. They're talking about different "orders" of being. There's the order of God in all his perfection and love, and the order of humanity, limited, selfish and earthbound. Verney sums up our problem like this, "The two orders are at war with each other. This is tragically how things are, but not at all as things should be."(23)

Jesus' mission, what he comes among us to do, is to put an end to this war. Using again the language of physical movement from one place to another, he has come to bring us home, to the place where we truly belong. In that other long discourse I mentioned earlier he utters the comforting words, "If I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."(14.3)

As he says this, he's about to bridge the chasm between "up" and "down", between "above" and "below", between the godly and the human. And the way he'll do it is to offer his human life simultaneously into the hands of sinful humans, and into those of his loving heavenly Father. After he's done this and has risen from his grave, he'll tell Mary Magdalene, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."(20.17)

He no longer marks out the difference between himself and the rest of us, as he did before.

He's achieved the reconciliation which is the point of his sharing our human life. You'll notice I say "is" and not "was", just as I shall say in few moments from now, "The Lord is here", not "The Lord has been here."

In our reading Jesus recalls the manna God sent to the children of Israel to keep them from starving to death in the desert. It did just that, but it wasn't the bread he's now offering his hearers. Now he offers them, and us, nothing less than his very self, both human and divine. This was no one off occasion, available just to those who happened to be there on the day. This living bread comes down from heaven, and by it Jesus invites us to share the life of God himself. It's been on offer ever since, and it still is this very day.

The gift of Jesus, the bread of heaven, is no magic substance which will instantly turn us into something we're not. It's food for life's journey, but with a difference. If we open ourselves to receive the gift of Jesus, he'll help us to become what God created us to be, his sons and daughters growing daily more like him and enjoying being in his loving embrace.

*Colin James*