

Sermon on Sunday 19th August 2018 – Trinity 12 (Proper 15 Yr B) - by The Reverend Canon David Hodgson – All Saints Church Wokingham

Readings: Ephesians 5 vv15 - 20; John 6 vv51-58

One of the things I like about going on holiday is trying out new kinds of food and drink. This year in Yorkshire I had a rhubarb cocktail for the first time. Rhubarb as some will know is a speciality of Yorkshire cuisine: the world-famous rhubarb triangle is located in West Yorkshire which once produced 90% of the world's winter forced rhubarb from the forcing sheds that were common across the fields there. A rhubarb cocktail I suppose is an inevitable outcome of our 21st century penchant for fusions of traditional and metropolitan tastes!

Yet other people dislike being places where they cannot get familiar food to eat. There was a story circulating on the internet recently about a British holidaymaker to Spain who complained that the hotel she stayed in had too many Spaniards and didn't serve enough British food.

We need sufficient and good enough food and drink to flourish. But there's more to food than that too. Food has meaning: it has social, cultural, symbolic meanings. The food we eat and the way we eat it says things about ourselves and about our place in the world. As society has become more diverse and globalised, and as individuals we exercise more choice about our preferences, so the range of food we can choose and the difference between choices has diversified. It's no longer appropriate to offer food in a community gathering for example without vegetarian or vegan options. And yet at the same time food has become a contested field; with big questions and debates about how truly healthful is the mass-produced pre-packaged and processed food we consume; how to ensure junk food doesn't squeeze out healthier diets whilst retaining personal choice; how to make sure mass food production methods are not harming the planet and leaving a toxic legacy for future generations to clean up – how healthy and how ethical is the food we eat?

So food can mobilise strong opinions and strong emotions. I read once an interview with a prison warder who said: getting the food wrong in a prison is the surest way to spark a riot. We are rarely neutral about food – after all the decision to eat some food is a very personal one; it becomes part of our bodies; ourselves; it is also an expression of who we are and what we care about. And as the saying goes: we are what we eat; and so that is more than simply an observation about our metabolism.

Both our Bible readings this morning use images of food and drink to get their message across. Don't get drunk with wine says the Letter to the Ephesians; be filled with the Spirit. In other words, be intoxicated instead with the love and goodness of God.

The gospel reading tells us Jesus is the food we need – the food for our souls. We need to let Jesus himself be the meat and drink of our spiritual lives. We need to draw on the sustenance of Jesus if we are to live and grow spiritually. Jesus is not just a giver of food like Moses in the wilderness to whom God sent miraculous bread when his people were hungry; Jesus is the food and drink our souls need.

What does this feeding on Jesus mean? Taking Jesus into ourselves; letting Jesus be a model for our lives; seeking the presence of Jesus in our lives; our thoughts, our

ambitions, our aspirations, our relationships with others. It means knowing God and finding God through Jesus. This is what it is to be Christian; to know God through Jesus; the life, the teachings, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, the flesh and blood, the man himself, God was and is in.

Once we have eaten food it is the food that nourishes us without us really having to do so much about it; so with spiritual food; it is Jesus who gives life to us when we receive him into ourselves; the life of the spirit of God. It is God who works in us; because we cannot work our way to God.

The words of Jesus in today's gospel reading refer to this sacrament of the Eucharist we celebrate every Sunday. John's Gospel has this whole section in Chapter 6 from which we just read in which Jesus teaches that he is the bread of life; teaches that eating his flesh and blood brings life. The readers of the day would understand very well that this was a message for them about the Eucharist. They would understand that this message was about making sure they were getting the right spiritual sustenance – Jesus.

As we receive this bread and wine by faith we receive Jesus himself. As a sacrament it is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace whereby Jesus comes into our lives by the Holy Spirit. In this action of receiving communion which we do in faith we are incorporated afresh into the body of Christ; we receive again the true food which Jesus is for our souls. This is not a mechanistic or magical process; but it is "by faith"; as we intend and seek this grace so it is received; as we receive these gifts of bread and wine so they become for us the body and blood of Christ.

We are what we eat. As Christians we know the way into God's presence is Jesus. We cannot be neutral about the spiritual food we choose. Jesus is the food of the Christian soul.