We are what we eat

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Pentecost + 13b – John 6.51-58

Isn’t it funny how sharing food is okay *within* families, but not outside them? It’s strictly limited to families. Double-dip your sausage roll in the sauce at a party and you very quickly become unpopular. Even families don’t do their usual garbage-guts routines in public; there’s not much plate swapping at a restaurant.

There are lots of taboos around food. Mouth to mouth food sharing is strictly limited to the most intimate relationships of all *(pelicans vulning)*. Break that taboo with someone and they’ll carry on as if you’ve poisoned them. Yes, there are lots of taboos to do with food. The strongest taboo of them all is against cannibalism – eating human flesh or drinking human blood. For Jewish people particularly, consuming any blood is an absolute taboo because the blood is the life (Gen 9.4, Lev 3.17 + fat!, 17.10-14, Deut 16, 23).

Nothing daunted, Jesus tells the Jewish people of his own home-district that they should eat his flesh and drink his blood; he says it over and over again. Naturally, they’re scandalised by this. But with our hearing, shaped by our familiarity with the language of Holy Communion, we miss a lot of the scandal. But we mustn’t miss it. Christian proclamation is meant to bring people to a decision: and scandal always calls you to take a stand. So if we read this passage from John through the soft focus of a comfortable, routine communion ritual, we won’t be confronted; we won’t decide. But that’s not how it should be.

Jesus doesn’t leave offence to chance; he makes sure he forces people to a choice. Who’s with me? Are you family? Do we share

food from each other's plates, forks, spoons, *mouths!*? Or are you going to leave? Does that sort of sharing scandalise you? Is it too intimate? Well it's the only way it can be. This is how John confronts us.

For me, John's gospel actually does give us an image of mouth-to-mouth feeding to teach us how very intimately God gives us life through Jesus. And it's not the only time: remember Ezekiel being given God's words to eat in the form of a scroll in preparation for his preaching. [Ezek 3.3] But John does it much more confrontingly. In 6.57, Jesus says, *Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*

Let's take that one phrase at a time. …*Just as the living Father sent me* … How did the Father send Jesus? John began this gospel by telling us how Jesus came to us from God? In the first chapter of John, we read that Jesus is the Word of God; that this Word was God; and that this Word became flesh and lived among us. …***Just*** *as the living Father sent me* … We're reminded to think about how God sent Jesus. That sends us back to the beginning, and in the beginning, we're effectively told that Jesus—the Word – came from the mouth of God – was spoken by God. So that's the first phrase.

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father…In this next phrase, ***and I live because of the Father…***connects us with chapter 1 again. There we read that the Word, spoken from the mouth of God, became flesh, and **lived** among us. But the sentence began with *just as*. These words mean we're waiting for the next part of a comparison—***Just as*** *the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father,* ***so*** *whoever eats me will live because of me.*

Jesus is saying, I came from the mouth of God. I live because I come from God, and so if that life from God's mouth is my flesh, and you eat my flesh, you will also have within ***you*** the life that comes from God. Out of God's mouth, and into yours

and mine, divine life is transmitted.

It might feel like I'm labouring the point a bit, but I want you to see how the evangelist is pushing us to see the confronting intimacy there is in – what is for us – the language of the Eucharist; the language of Holy Communion. Genesis 2.7 springs to mind; *then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being* – there's the first kiss of life, for all you St John's life-saving graduates out there.

In both our dominical sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, the life of God passes into us mouth to mouth. In baptism, we believe it's by the breath – the Spirit, who enters us and gives us our new life in Jesus. And in communion, it's by the bread and wine – the body and blood of Christ that we receive and put in our mouths. The bread and wine nourish us in extraordinary ways. They make us grow, and they assert, week by week, that *we* are now God's flesh and blood; the family of God; the body of Christ. We are what we eat.

And that changes the world for us, doesn't it. I get an idea of just how changed it is when I remember how St Augustine of Hippo wrote 'I shall never be separated from God' *Commentary on Psalm 26/2, 18*.This was for Augustine the most important fact about the world that he discovered inside and outside himself.

He discovered that this is a beautiful world of land and sea and sky in which each individual is most precious. It's a world in which that astounding, transcendent wonder that is God walks the streets with human beings as our neighbour, friend, doctor, sister, brother and parent. It is no wonder that Augustine heard this as a consoling message to a struggling humanity:

Wherever you go on earth, (he wrote) *however long you remain,*

the Lord is close to you. So don’t worry about anything. The Lord is nearby. [Sermon 171, 5.]

Mouth to mouth intimacy. Closer than we are to ourselves.

Amen