

St John the Divine, Merton
12th Sunday after Trinity August 22nd 2021

Joshua 24.1-2a, 14-18; John 6.56-69

Very controversial words we have in this Gospel: *"Those who eat of my flesh and drink of my blood abide in me, and I in them ... whoever eats me will live because of me."* These were hard words for Jesus' hearers.

Some of them must have been horrified by the image this conjured up in their minds.

Even today, Roman Catholics and Anglicans are separated by this concept.

Traditionally, Roman Catholics believe the host – the wafer – is the true presence of Christ: Transubstantiation. And we believe, traditionally, that the wafer – the host – is symbolic of Christ's presence.

Christ, of course, was talking about Himself as the real presence. God had given the Jewish people manna in the desert. But he also presented the descendants of those Jewish people with His Son. At no time did God the Father present His own self in human form ... to take all the blows and insults that Jesus took. But ... the Lord presented His Son.

So Christ **was** the living body and blood. He was the sacrifice, and He was the way to eternal life. So the little wafer which we take in the palm of our hand every Sunday in the Eucharist is very precious indeed. The Eucharist is certainly precious and comes with a lot of history. I don't think any of us who receives it takes the experience lightly.

A little more lightly, perhaps, might we take the words from the first reading, although if someone said these words to me, I would vehemently deny it, and say what the Israelites said when they were questioned by Joshua – and this was his question: *"Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served ... or the gods of the Amorites."*

We would look at those options and say: "Well, there **is** no choice. It has to be the Lord." But is it? When somebody is successful in business or in exams, how often do those closest to them say: "You've worked hard. You only have yourself to thank for your success. This is your work and yours alone. Nobody did this for you!" It's kind. It's complementary; part of it is true. But it's making a god out of that person's effort and industry.

If pushed, it might even make a god out of treading on the person in front of you – pushing aside those in your path.

I don't think any of **us** would do that. We're a Christian community of people pulled from all walks of life, and nobody here seems to have a bad word to say about anybody else. But ... to come back to these gods and the one true God, I think we do forget Him a bit in our own congratulations. You can almost feel Him giving us a clap, and then slipping unnoticed out of the back door. And yet, His work, if we think about it – is everywhere and is going on all the time.

Before I moved to Colliers Wood, I lived in a 4-bedroom Vicarage in Plaistow, East London. We had a big garden at the back, and quite a big one at the front. The back garden was mainly lawn with some fairly meaningful deciduous trees on one side. So in the autumn, there were lots of leaves to clear. But you know, I didn't need to clear every single leaf, because some – I could see – were disappearing into the grass. They were being pulled down, I was told, by the worms. Imagine that! This tiny worm, with no hydraulic equipment, not even a pair of little arms, pulls something the size of a roof into the ground. And it was a ground full of grass roots – not a patch of well-hoed soil that you could run your hands through. No self-respecting little worm could do that on his own.

The Lord had to be at work making it happen.

The front garden of the Vicarage hadn't been dug over properly for almost twelve years. And moving there in September after a very hot summer, the ground was solid. I was still trying to hack away at it in November.

But then, after a particularly frozen winter, when I couldn't touch the ground at all, some little snowdrops appeared. Now imagine, they go down about this much, and they don't send up a shoot like a metal knitting needle. It's soft and spindly, and when it appears, you can just take it between finger and thumb, and destroy it as easily as anything. And yet that spindly little shoot has pushed its way up through seemingly impenetrable soil. Nobody teaches it. Nobody gives it lessons. It's God's work in nature.

I think we can all see that kind of miracle. If we're into natural phenomenon, we might acknowledge how much the Lord is present and at work in our world. But do we acknowledge His work when we pass an exam – when we're successful in business – in relationships? Do we acknowledge Him when a crane lifts heavy soil and parts of buildings from one place to another? We might remark on the skills of the man operating the crane or the company that's made that machinery. But do we see God's work in all this? And by not seeing Him – not acknowledging Him – are we serving other gods - gods of our own making - gods we're encouraged to acknowledge by the people who say: "*you only have yourself to thank; you've done so well on your own.*"

And so, we come back to the core – the nub – the centre of this Gospel passage. We come back to the presence – the symbol of Christ – in this little wafer that we receive each Sunday and at every Eucharist. As we take this body of Christ into our bodies, we have to acknowledge - we can only acknowledge that **nothing** we do is without Christ's presence, His wisdom, His blessing. All our successes and failures have Christ at the core. And it's all there in these last words of Peter: "*We have come to believe and know that you are the holy One of God.*"

We have come to believe it too!

Amen