

John 6:56-69 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Sermon: Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

I thought I'd spend a few moments today sharing with you what those words of Jesus mean for me: those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Those words connect me with the words which I believe were spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper. Reading from Mark's account: he took a loaf of bread and after blessing it, broke it, and gave it to them. Take: this is my body. Then he took a cup and after giving thanks he gave it to them. This is my blood of the covenant. Luke adds: 'Do this in remembrance of me'.

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

How did those words become so important for me? My earliest experiences of going to church have evidently had a long lasting impact, aside of the fact that, when I was a very young child and growing up, the only job I ever really wanted to do in the church was to blow out the candles at the end of the service...(!). Church for me always meant Holy Communion – it was always a Communion service. It was only ever called that, in the Church I went to; the meanings of the words Eucharist, or Mass, only revealed themselves to me at a later date. There was a routine in the church: as a child, I knew where to sit or stand, when to kneel, when to move up to the front, to the altar. Words such as chancel or sanctuary – I had no idea what they meant, but I knew what I was supposed to do!

And it was that moving to the front, to the altar, which held something very special for me. There's a real simplicity to this – perhaps just due to the unquestioning stance of a young child copying the grown-ups and trying to do the same. But though simple, the impact on me was very important: I wasn't allowed to receive the wafer or wine; there was no tradition of First Communion and receiving the bread and wine had to wait until I was confirmed as a young adult. But going to kneel at that altar rail and therefore getting as close as I was permitted to where the main action of Holy Communion seemed to be happening, well, that, way back then, simply felt good. Why was it, and how could it be, that as a young child I felt something very special – almost magical and untouchable yet appealing - about being there.

In my later life I think I came to understand this a little better: when I was going through the lengthy process of discerning whether I was being called to Ordained Ministry, it became a self-imposed necessity for me to want to be able to articulate why I felt that Holy Communion was so central to my calling. What I landed on was that it was in the receiving of the bread and wine that I felt closest to Jesus: simple: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them'. Holy Communion was one way of abiding in Jesus and inviting Him to abide within me. What was there not to like about believing in abiding in Jesus? It was all good – but up to then I'd received almost no explanations or teaching or even others opinions about what it might be all about.

The simplicity of my belief that Holy Communion was where I felt I came closest to Jesus, was, of course, inarguable. It was my belief, and I could own it as strongly and purposefully as I wished. The beauty of that kind of belief is that I actually didn't have to try and justify it or explain it when younger to anyone: it just was. And it was good. But it left me with a question. Why? Why was it that I believed that Holy Communion was the place where I came closest to Jesus? This was something which began to work its deeper reasons out not really until my time at theological college and beyond into Curacy. And true to form when we start to question something, our thinking becomes far more complicated and extensive than we could ever have imagined.

You'll probably be relieved to hear that we're not going to delve into too much theological complexity and we're not going to get extensive either! There's plenty of books on this matter that you can go away and read – ask me afterwards for some of my favourites that I've picked up in recent years.

So let's roll the clock forward from my young childhood simplicity of understanding to about 40 years later and we'll dig just a little deeper. My first childhood belief: Holy Communion is the place I come closest to Jesus. My second and more recent one: Presiding at the Eucharist is the most charismatic thing I do.... *Presiding at the Eucharist is the most charismatic thing I do* How did I get from the first statement of belief to the second statement?

The difference between the two may sound like a bit of a quantum leap, but it really isn't. Setting aside any arguments about how something can be both sacramental and charismatic, (more of that on another day maybe) it really depends I think as to how you interpret the word charisma.

Some translations of that Greek word point us not towards the typical use of the word – 'she's a charismatic person, that is, charming and lively and draws people to her' – No! That's definitely not what I'm meaning. Other translations point us more contextually to a power, or magnetic attraction of something that's happening – or even a mystical activity, something then that we can't perhaps fully understand - but we're drawn to drawn towards. And it often involves something beyond our human capacity to understand.

For me then, what happens at the Eucharistic table when the Priest prays the Eucharistic words of Jesus in the Liturgy, prays over the bread and wine – consecrating them, making them holy - what’s actually happening is the invocation of the Holy Spirit – the calling on the Holy Spirit to be present in the bread and wine. And that’s why I call it charismatic: we’re invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit to be real and present to us within the bread and wine – this is my body / this is my blood. We’re inviting Jesus to be present through the Spirit. Do I believe in transubstantiation – because I bet some of you are wondering! Well no, I don’t, not really. After I’ve prayed the Liturgy and consecrated the bread and wine, the bread and wine remain just the same to our eyes – they’re still bread and wine, but Jesus through the Spirit is present, and we can’t see that – it’s a spiritual thing.

But I also believe that this is a personal thing – and everyone, like me, will have their own specific belief about it. Lots of us here today would I’m sure have our own interpretation, our own belief. This is simply mine.

It was only later in life, then, when I looked back at my early childhood belief, that I could see and finally explain why ‘holy communion is the place I come closest to Jesus’. Now I understand: Jesus is present; Jesus is here through the Spirit. That magnetic attraction – may be closer then to the typical translation of the word charisma – was what was drawing me as a child. I felt drawn to Jesus, to abide in Him as he promised to abide in me. Today I know for sure that this is the place – at the Table of Jesus - that I come closest to Him, where I can feast on his body and blood. This is the closest I can get!

And the habit that was formed as a very young child? Well that fits very well with those words 'do this in remembrance of me' – we do so, and we always will, as long as we can and are able. And, by the way, you'll probably have noticed that in my early days I consistently used the words 'holy communion'. And when older, Eucharist, as my understanding of this as Thanksgiving was materialising. And more recently, Mass – the gathered people of God around the Table of Jesus where his body and blood is shared and from which most crucially we are sent out: *Ite Missa Est*: Mass is ended: *Deo Gratias!* Then GO! Go out to everyone else. It is both a privilege and a joy to be able to partake in this Feast, yet our over-riding responsibility is that we do not keep this for ourselves, but go out into the world to invite others to abide in him, as he abides in us. The bread of Jesus is not just for us, but for the whole world. Amen.