



Sunday, 19 August 2018 – Trinity 12
Sermon for 10.00am Eucharist at St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Readings: 2 Ephesian 5:15-20, Gospel St John 6:51-58
Focusing on contrasts in worship
Given by Rev Juliette E C Robilliard

St Paul's exhortations to the Ephesians may, at face value, sound similar to those of our parents' comments to us when we were teenagers or, possibly, you to your children before they went out to a party "Don't drink too much!" Sobriety is commendable but having a goal beyond being virtuous gives purpose, so what was Paul really driving at?

Paul was a great one for lecturing people but he had a loving purpose and that was always to point people to Christ. He was encouraging the new church to make both a cultural and creedal change of direction from the general way of worshipping in Ephesus. Animal sacrifice was common when worshipping the ancient gods but it always ended in drunken debauchery. Before we get too moralistic about this, we need, however, to understand why the Ephesians indulged to excess to make sense of Paul's comments in his Epistle and also Jesus' remarks in the Gospel.

A burnt offering from animal sacrifice usually only required a token part of the animal to be burnt. The remainder was given to the worshippers to enjoy at a feast. Part of the worship was to pray that their gods would join in the feast and by so doing these gods would infuse the feast with their divine nature. So, for the ancient Ephesians to show respect and complete allegiance to their gods, what better way than to eat the flesh and drink the libations to excess? The problem with that worship, however, was that after the hangover was over there was nothing left but emptiness. St Paul makes it plain that that is no longer the way for Christians to worship, as the heathen gods are nothing more mere idols contrasting with following the way of Christ who is the living God. He urges the Ephesians to set aside their libations and instead be filled with the Holy Spirit's eternal discernment and wisdom. Every generation has its idols but still there is only one living God.

This leads neatly into the Gospel in which Jesus continues his discourse with the Jews that we have been considering in our readings over the last few Sundays. Jesus again tells them that he is the living bread and expands on his comments. To our modern, Western ears Jesus might seem to be labouring his point talking evermore graphically about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Taken literally that would be repellent but, to the Jews, this is not a revolting topic of discussion. In their culture they were brought up from childhood knowing all about animal sacrifice in common with other nations cultures. Just like the Ephesians, sacrifice was the way to worship and, in particular, for the Jews, animal sacrifice was a means of atonement for sin.

The Jews, debate Jesus' comments and tie themselves into theological knots. They are judging Jesus' remarks by human values and their rigid tradition thereby failing to view faith from his divine perspective. Hence, they have a circular argument amongst themselves about how they could eat the physical flesh of a human-being who claims divine status. We know that their discussions did not lead to holy resolutions but rather to murderous intent. The Jews machinations will come to fruition on another day, instead let's consider what Jesus really wanted them, and us, to understand.

Jesus tries to explain that he is the bread of life in its eternal fullness because he will offer his whole life, not just a token part, as an eternal atonement for sin. In making the ultimate sacrifice of his own flesh and blood once and for all for the sins of the whole world, there will be no more need for costly banquets killing the fatted calf or, the sacrificial lamb.

If we want eternal life God gives it freely: all we have to do is recognise our need of forgiveness for our sins and ask for this grace through his Son. To receive his forgiveness is to be in communion with him and the outward sign of that inward blessing is through the sacrament of the Eucharist with broken bread and wine outpoured. The bread and wine are more than representational of flesh and blood. In Jesus' time they were the daily staples of every bodies' diet: another symbol that his loving forgiveness is freely available to all. This is The Way of life and faith that Christ would have us follow in perfect union with him.

The Jews just didn't get it. The question is, do we?

Amen.