

2024 08 18 sermon **Pastor Vince Gerhardy**

Grace to you and peace from God our father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, by Pastor Vince Gerhardy, is entitled “**Hard to Swallow**”, based on John chapter 6: verses 51 and 55 – 56.

Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever. ... My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him”.

Think of a time when you had a special meal.

What made it special? Was it sitting back and enjoying a waiter serving you a meal and drinks, then clearing away the dishes and bringing the next course, and you didn't have to do a thing? Or was it waiting for the doorbell to ring, signifying Skip the Dishes or Door-dash? Was it the people around the table, the chatting and the laughter? Was it the love and the warmth that you felt from the group at the table that has firmly fixed that occasion in your memory?

Or maybe you have a number of these special memories – like the days you sat around the table with parents and brothers and sisters when you were a child.

Or perhaps the times you took your own family on barbeques and picnics.

Probably not many of us would be able to give very much detail about the food that we ate, but we do remember the people and what happened around the table.

I think the same applies to those who sat around a table, and ate with Jesus.

People remembered that He ate with the most unlikely people – sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

In fact, we don't know what was served, but we do know these meals were something not to be forgotten. These occasions have been recorded in the Gospels for all time.

Even when Jesus sat at table with those who considered themselves enemies of Jesus – people like the Pharisees – that meal was etched in their memories as they listened to Jesus and saw His love in action as He embraced what they regarded as the riffraff of society.

When Jesus sat down to dinner with His best friends – the twelve disciples – they were always amazed. For example, at the Last Supper, they were stunned when He got down on His knees and washed their dirty feet – an act of humility, sacrifice, service, and love. A moment, an example, they never forgot.

The last few weeks we have been hearing from John chapter 6. Out of loving concern for more than 5,000 hungry people, He used a boy's lunch and fed them all. If that wasn't amazing enough, that miracle (or sign as John likes to call Jesus' miracles, because they tell us something important about Jesus) became the background to what Jesus said next, *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat this bread, you will live forever"* (John 6:54).

Bread has been a basic food down through the ages, and like water, so important to daily survival. When Jesus says, *"I am the bread of life", "I am the living bread"*, He is saying that He is essential to the life of every person on this planet. No-one can do without this bread if they want to get out of this life alive. Eat me, consume me, swallow me, get as much of me as you can, because in me you will have life forever. There is no other way to get this kind of nourishment; people try all sorts of different things, and others deny that they need this important life-giving food. They are starving themselves.

Remember right at the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is referred to as the *"Word who became flesh"* – the eternal God became a human being. So when Jesus is urging us to *"eat this bread and you will live forever; this bread is my flesh"*, He is first of all saying, "Believe in me. Swallow the truth that I am the eternal God who created the world, the universe, and everything in it,

and then came into this world as a human being, with skin and bones, just like you. I was born as my mother Mary cried out in pain in the same way as your mothers cried out. I bled just like you. I bled and died on a cross”.

It's a hard thing to swallow that the eternal God should come into the world in this way, be so shamefully treated, and end up nailed to a cross. That the almighty, eternal, all-perfect God should do all this for sinners like you and me, that's quite something to swallow.

But Jesus says (and He uses a word that means all of these things), “Eat, devour, chew, munch, gnaw on it if you have to, because this is the truth. Believe me when I say, *‘I am the Bread that came down from heaven (the Word made flesh), and I will give you life forever.’*”

Another hard thing to swallow is the realization that we are sinners through and through. We can't change, and we need help. Even if we don't recognize that we need help, we still need Jesus to give His life for us. He willingly sacrificed His life, so that we might live.

So Jesus says, *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life”*. To drink His blood is to believe He shed His blood and sacrificed His life to set us free; as Luther said, *“He set me free from all my sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. It cost Him more than gold or silver; it cost Him His life. Even though He was holy and innocent, He suffered and died for me”* (from the Small Catechism).

“Drink my blood,” Jesus says, “and believe that your sins are forgiven through My sacrifice on the cross”.

There is no other food – there is no other person – who is able to save us, and give us eternal life. Listen to Jesus speaking about this, *“Anyone who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. Anyone who eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in him”* (John 6:54-56).

Trusting and believing these words of Jesus is no pushover.

Yes, we may know them and acknowledge them as important words of Jesus, but to rely on Jesus, and to trust in Jesus, is not an inborn, natural thing that people want to do. In fact, the sinner in us wants to do the direct opposite.

Our intelligence says there is no way someone who lived 2000 years ago can have any impact on my life today.

Our intellect says that a man on a cross cannot wipe away another person's bad deeds.

Our intelligence says that there is plenty of better advice around from other gurus and wise people that makes a lot more sense like, "Be kind – that's the way to immortality". Doesn't that sound wiser than "I am the living bread, eat My flesh?"

I'm sure you've had discussions with people who have found that God in the flesh, who dies for humans, is too hard to believe.

The process of believing in Jesus might be a slow one as the person chews over the meaning of God becoming a human, and Jesus dying and rising for us. The process might be like eating what we used to call as kids "An all-day sucker" – a lollypop that you rolled around in your mouth and took almost all day to dissolve. Likewise, we may need to encourage a person who is searching, and that might also include ourselves – to roll the bread of life around in our mouths like an "all day sucker" – suck on it, taste its flavour, maybe try to bite on it as we think about what Jesus really means for us in our everyday lives, and appreciate the forgiveness, peace, and hope that Jesus gives.

For some of us, the Holy Spirit has to work overtime in getting through to us, and to believe that Jesus is the living bread, and those who eat this bread will have life forever.

There is something more. When the readers of John's Gospel heard these words of Jesus, "*My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. Anyone who eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in him*" they would have reflected on the night Jesus gave His disciples, and the church, bread and wine and His body and blood.

The celebration of Holy Communion in their own worship services would have come to mind. And rightly so, because there is this deeper understanding of what is being said by Jesus.

We believe that in Holy Communion we take into our own bodies the body and blood of Jesus. Not only do we remember, and give thanks to God for all that Christ has done for us through His life, death and resurrection, but we are also joined to Christ and become one with Him, as we eat and drink His body and blood. We become one with Him on the cross where our sins have been crucified; we become one with Him in His resurrection, and His victory over death becomes our victory; we become one with Him in His ascension into heaven, and we already share in the heavenly glory.

In Holy Communion, Jesus doesn't just tell us He is the bread of life, He shows us, and gives us something we can see, and touch, and taste. He gives us His true body and blood to eat and drink for forgiveness and eternal life. It is in this meal He comes and lives in us and we in Him. Jesus said that those who eat and drink in the sacrament "*remain in Me and I in them*". (John 6:56).

It's a hard thing to swallow that simple bread and wine can be the body and blood of Jesus. We might have to chew on it for a while, but in the end, we may come with the faith of a child, a questioning faith, an uncertain faith, a confused faith – but still a faith. We may not understand everything there is to know about Holy Communion, and how it works, but that's okay. There is a mystery here. All we do is put out our empty hands, and God does the rest. He fills them with His grace – "*By eating My flesh and drinking My blood you enter into Me and I into you,*" Jesus says (John 6:56 *The Message*).

What closer connection can you get than that between God and us? No-one else can offer that kind of comfort, reassurance, forgiveness, security, hope, and peace, for the present and the future. How much closer can we be to our Creator, Saviour and Sanctifier?

"Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood live in Me and I in them."

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
as we wait expectantly for His coming. Amen.

Introduction to the readings for August 18

The **Old Testament** reading from Proverbs calls us to seek Wisdom.

In the **Epistle reading**, St. Paul exhorts us to follow the Word of God, to live with wisdom in the light of Christ.

And the **Gospel reading**, the basis for today's sermon, Jesus teaches us that we must 'eat His body and drink His blood' – that is, to totally accept and follow Him.