

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 12th Sunday after Trinity

22nd August 2021

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When I saw the reading set for today, I was in total sympathy with Paul when he wrote “Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God’s mysterious plan.” These two passages are really hard to explain simply and understandably. I’m used to Paul being somewhat undecipherable but John tops him today.

Let’s start with Paul’s passage about putting on the armour of God, based what he saw Roman soldiers wearing. Most of a Roman soldier’s armour was worn for defence, not attack. He uses military images – alongside the strategies that will conquer very real spiritual enemies, evil and the devil. Most importantly he asks the Ephesians to pray all the time, pray in the spirit for everyone. Nowadays it’s fashionable not to believe in evil or the devil, but Paul had no such illusions – we are constantly under attack and need to defend ourselves.



Looking at the Roman armour - The belt kept the armour in place and protected the kidneys and other vital organs. The belt of truth keeps us together and helps us defeat the lies of the devil such as that materialism, power, money and pleasure are the most important things in life.

The breastplate protected the heart and lungs - the breastplate of righteousness protects us against fatal mistakes and whatever evil can throw at our hearts.

Sturdy footwear protected the soldiers against rough terrain, sharp stones or spikes – the gospel of peace protects us from the sharp stones of life and the devil.

The shield was the most important piece of equipment, protecting against arrows, swords, spears and rocks, and it guards us against doubt, fears and evil.

The helmet protected the head, and protects our thoughts and minds from infiltration by the devil.

The sword was a sharp, offensive weapon, and our sword is the word of God. Our only weapon!

And prayer is the communication line between us and our Commander.

Now on to John.

A question I am often asked is “what do you do with your sheep?” and people can be shocked when I reply that we eat them, and they taste great! Many people nowadays aren’t close to the production of food. Having seen us looking after our sheep, it’s hard to contemplate us killing them, cutting them up and eating them – particularly when they find out that Garry does the cutting up and I do the mincing! Some of our friends are vegetarian and find it all highly repugnant.

So to read about Jesus talking about people eating his flesh and drinking his blood is likely to bring on a real sense of nausea if taken literally. His listeners would have been appalled – the Israelites were specifically banned from consuming blood, as it says in Leviticus - “If any native Israelite or foreigner living among you eats or drinks blood in any form, I (God) will turn against that person and cut him off from the community of your people, for the life of the body is in its blood.” It goes on “You must never eat or drink blood, for the life of any creature is in its blood.”

Those listening to Jesus talking about drinking his blood would have been shocked and most offended. Little wonder that many left him at that point.

What does he mean when he talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Is it cannibalism? Is it supposed to be taken literally or not?

Let's start at the beginning. God has given a clear instruction that no-one must drink blood – hence kosher butchery, where the animal killed is emptied of all blood. So all this talk of blood is going against that clear instruction if Jesus really meant the red stuff coursing through his veins. God also states that the life force of an animal is in its blood. So then, logically, if one were to consume the blood of an animal, one would also be consuming its life force and would have that life force inside oneself. Hang on to that thought!

Jesus says that he is the Word made flesh. He talks about losing his own life, for the benefit of humanity. His flesh and his blood will be poured out to put the world back to how God intended it to be – the sacrificial lamb we talk about so often. Jesus also refers to himself as the Son of Man – he was just as at home on earth with us lot as he was in heaven with God. In this passage he refers to “the Son of Man ascending to where he was before. It's the spirit that gives life, the flesh is no help. The words that I have spoken to you – they are spirit, they are life.”

He needs us to let the Word, the Holy Spirit, into our souls and bodies, to drink it in and with it the life force of Jesus. We need to eat his words, literally, to gnaw on them, to take their nourishment inside us. Without that, without truly believing in Jesus, in joining him as closely as we can, we are going nowhere. Christ said at the Last Supper, to take bread and drink wine in remembrance of him. We do that now as a sacrament when we feed on him in our hearts.

What exactly is a sacrament? To Eastern churches, a sacrament is a holy mystery. Many Christians consider it to be a way of seeing the reality of God, a channel of God's grace which can be seen and touched. It's important to us as a way of physically being closer to God through Christ.

So when we take the sacrament of communion, there's a huge amount of meaning behind it. It isn't just getting a sip of wine and a dry wafer. This is really difficult to explain to a nine-year old grandson who doesn't understand why he can't come up to the front with his Granddad and get what everyone else is getting.

But the point is this, that by physically taking the wine (in non- pandemic times) and the wafer, we are in our hearts chewing on Christ's words and allowing his life force to flow through us. We aren't physically eating his flesh and drinking his blood (although some think that we are doing just that), but to him that wasn't the idea – the idea is to join with him, so that we become one body with him and all the others who believe in God, and believe that Jesus was the Son of God, both human and divine. It isn't enough to just go up to the altar week after week if we don't have faith, if we aren't prepared to let Christ in and become his body, to do with as he pleases, not as we please. You can't fool God – you can eat a ton of wafers and drink a gallon of wine but if you don't have faith, all you'll get is indigestion and a sore head later. It's faith and the spirit which are central to this complicated business. And anyone going up to the altar for Communion needs to understand what it is they are doing and what it is going to cost them, as well as give them.

To let Christ's life force flow through you means becoming his body – his hands, his thoughts, his actions. Doing his work of looking after the poor, the sick, the homeless, the stranger, the hungry, the homeless, the frightened, the lonely. Telling people about him, not just in church but out in the wide world.

Amen.