

Sermon for Proper 14, Year B

The Text: John 6:51-61

There are times when Jesus is speaking figuratively and there are times when he is speaking literally. And it's important to know the difference. When Jesus says he is the Bread of Life he is speaking figuratively. Just in case you didn't know, or needed to have things cleared up, Jesus is not a loaf of bread. You cannot find him on a shelf at the supermarket. He used the positive associations we have with bread to compare with himself – he provides us with spiritual food and satisfaction much like bread meets our physical hunger. Jesus refers to himself figuratively as the vine – he is the vine we are the branches. Again, just to clarify, Jesus is not really a vine anymore than you are really branches. Jesus is not a plant growing somewhere in a field; but it paints a good picture about how we rely on him for everything. Jesus is referred to figuratively as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. At the same time he refers to himself as the Good Shepherd who looks after the sheep. Being sheep and shepherd all at once would be quite a job if Jesus weren't speaking figuratively. But he is on those occasions. The trouble is, sometimes Jesus is speaking literally. Even more troubling is that sometimes he speaks figuratively and literally all in the same paragraph. It can make it a little difficult to know when he is doing one and when he is doing the other.

In the accounts of the Lord's Supper, Jesus says some very simple words: "Take and eat, this is my body given for you. Take and drink, this is the blood of the new covenant shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me."

Now we know the pattern: Jesus says 'I am the bread of life' and we know that it's figurative – just a comparison. I am the good shepherd – figurative. I am the vine – figurative. This is my body and

blood – figurative... Right? Or is he being literal now? It would be nice if he made up his mind...

The accounts of the Lord's Supper all come from Matthew, Mark and Luke. These are known as the Synoptic gospels: *syn* meaning the same and *optic* meaning seeing. They often tell the same stories as each other because they saw the same things or the people reporting it to them saw the same things. In these gospels the writers are just giving slightly varied accounts of the same events according to particular distinctions they wanted to highlight.

The Gospel of John is the odd one out. In John there is the *Last Supper* but there is no *Lord's Supper*. At the Last Supper in the gospel of John, Jesus washes his disciples' feet. That doesn't happen in the other gospels. But there is no dialogue about take and eat, take and drink, this is my body and blood. Now we know that John was there at the meal. So why doesn't he mention it? Doesn't John care about the Lord's Supper?

John does care about the Lord's Supper. In fact, he cares so much about it that he doesn't merely mention it in a short paragraph. Instead he uses most of one chapter, John 6, to show just how important the Lord's Supper is. Take a listen to the words he records Jesus saying about the Lord's Supper. "This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them."

It seems like John wants to get the story straight. Jesus says 'my flesh is *real* food and my blood is *real* drink' and John must be hoping that we get the picture: this isn't figurative speech anymore. In Holy Communion, Jesus gives us his body and blood to eat. Really. For real. How extraordinary.

Now if that's not true, if Jesus was actually only speaking figuratively and he wanted people to think that we receive his

body and blood in a purely symbolic way in Holy Communion, it's not like he didn't have a chance to clarify. On hearing Jesus, John says that many of his disciples complained: 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' Surely Jesus had the chance to say, 'Hey, it's not so hard, don't worry. It's just figurative, you know. Like the bread and the vine, and the shepherd and the lamb.'

But he doesn't. Instead Jesus says, "Does this offend you? The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus has his chance; but he doesn't take it. Then, John records some of the loneliest words of Jesus' ministry, at least the loneliest before his betrayal and crucifixion. John says, 'From this time many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer followed him.'

Up until the time of the Reformation, the church had basically only ever taught that we receive Jesus' true body and blood in the sacrament. For about 1500 years it hadn't had much debate or discussion – it was a given. But when the Reformation came many of the church's ancient teachings were called into question and a Swiss reformer, named Ulrich Zwingli, stated that Jesus' body and blood were not present in Holy Communion. Zwingli's argument was that Jesus had ascended into heaven and is now sitting at the right hand of God and so consequently Jesus couldn't be up there and down here all at the same time.

Martin Luther disagreed. In 1529 these two great reformers met for an event called the Marburg Colloquy, which was where the local ruler, Philip of Hesse, wanted to build a united front against his political enemies who were Roman Catholic. Luther was asked to draw up 15 articles of faith for he and Zwingli to discuss and agree upon. They managed to get through the first fourteen without too much trouble. But when they reached number fifteen, they found that they just couldn't agree. Article fifteen was, of course, asking whether we really eat Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion or whether Jesus was just speaking figuratively.

The debate hinged on where Jesus remains. Zwingli said that Christ remains at the right hand of God, therefore he can't remain in the

bread and wine. Luther said that sitting at the right hand of God isn't a geographical space. Rather, it means that Jesus rules as God's right hand man. Ephesians 4:10 says about Jesus, "He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, *in order to fill the whole universe.*" Luther argued that by ascending into heaven, Jesus is no longer limited to space and time as he was when he lived in Judea. Jesus is now able to remain everywhere.

This issue, about whether Jesus body and blood are truly present in Holy Communion, is in fact how the Lutheran church came to be in Australia. The Prussian King who had Lutheran churches and Reformed churches in his realm, wanted his people to be united and ruled that they must all follow one liturgy, the one of the Reformed churches, meaning that Lutherans would have to accept the teaching that Jesus' body and blood are not present in Holy Communion. These German Lutherans were not willing to give that up. And after some persecution and much activity, they contacted an Englishman named Mr Angas who ran an organisation called the South Australia Company, and they were given a way out of their persecution – an incredibly long boat ride to South Australia.

Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them."

This is a literal promise, and a literal reality.

When we receive Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist we literally remain in Jesus. He lives in us and we live in him. It is the meal by which he proclaims we are his forgiven people and he is with us—really and truly—forever. Amen.