



**This teaching is difficult**

**Rev Cate Thorn**

Year B, Ordinary 20

1 Kings 2: 10-12; 3:3-14; John 6: 51-58

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Yes, it's the bread of life again! As Amanda suggested last week, we might understand this continuing season of the bread of life as a season of evolving and deepening understanding. John's Jesus is pushing us. Three weeks ago, Richard talked of abundant feasting and the reality that too many are denied this, of our responsibility to ensure an equitable share. Susan pushed us deeper, give, feed the hungry, of course but ask deeper questions and act to overturn the unjust systems that embed and ensure inequity prevails. Amanda reminded us, yes, it is about the doing, the acting and **also** about the spiritual.

It's tempting to get judgy, to polarise, to see doing as better than deeper or spiritual, to exclude and prioritise. However, the example of our scripture is to include. All number of things and characters we deem holy or unholy are part of, included in the stories. Without **all** of them the story we tell wouldn't be as it is. So, we might see that the varying meanings of the bread metaphor being discerned Sunday after Sunday, each have a part, are needed and included.

Today's gospel declares, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" What do you think it is about the teaching that's most difficult? Is it that the teaching appears to be advocating some form of cannibalism? After all, it's pretty out there, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is **my flesh...unless you eat the flesh** of the Son of Man and **drink his blood**, you have no life in you...this...bread is not like that which your ancestors ate and they died ...but the one who eats this bread will live forever." I think this is definitely

an issue, even with one or two thousand years distance I experience some squirming discomfort.

It reminded me of a time I met with a bright-eyed group of tweenagers, a Brownie pack. They'd come to the church to explore and ask questions about religion, part of the work toward their religion badge. I'd already fielded some gnarly questions such as, how could I be a priest when the local Catholic priest at the church they attended had taught them that God had said it wasn't possible for a woman to be a priest – it was in the bible, topic for another day. We were sitting in the transept when I felt the glowering glare of a very focused 12-year-old upon me. Sitting slightly apart, arms firmly crossed, she asked me to explain quite what it was about eating the bread and wine that was so important for people that went to church, she knew it was a thing. **And**, more particularly, if we really **did** understand it to be Jesus' flesh and blood. If that was so, it was totally gross and made absolutely no sense. I was somewhat flummoxed. As I recall I agreed with her and fudged something about it being a bit more complex than that, which would take some time to unpack, all the while feeling rather pinned by her withering stare. Aren't young women just marvellous at that age?!

How do we explain, how do we know in ourselves what it means? Jesus' words are confronting. No gentle metaphor here. These words are in your face, bodily and physically. Flesh and blood are very real, we know, we're very familiar with our flesh and blood in real life.

Maybe what's also difficult is that this teaching challenges established understandings of faith, the bread of the ancestors, manna from heaven expectations. Jesus shocks his followers, he's moved from parable teaching, miracle-working prophet of his followers' expectations. Jesus turns the tables - no longer is it the followers who are demanding something of Jesus but Jesus who's demanding something of them. Quite simply, if they're to follow Jesus, to align and identify with Jesus, they're being asked to give up their very lives. A share in the body and blood of Christ is a share in the life of Christ, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me

and I in them.” And this Christ, living bread that came down from heaven is “the bread that was given for the life of the world.”

Unlike manna, the bread of the ancestors, this food isn't about eating something and going on as usual, this food is about ingesting something **in order to be** changed, transformed. As we know, Jesus' life trajectory is one of self-emptying for the life of the world. Becoming one in this Jesus' energy will change us and the trajectory of our lives **for** the life of the world.

So today it's another push deeper, deeper into identity. We may hear it pushing us to ask ourselves who we are and how we understand ourselves. Upon what is our self-understanding founded?

Because we do each understand ourselves in our own a particular way. As a person with certain traits, qualities, existing in a certain place, context and time. From this we've evolved a sense of personhood, of identity. OK, it can be a moveable feast. However, in order to survive and more or less successfully negotiate our way through life, we construct an identity for ourselves. An identity constructed in relationship and in response to our world, by the many factors and facets that influence us. So, our identity is necessarily framed by and formed in our social world. And I would posit in the West, it's a world and society that has injustice embedded at its core. We could name it capitalism, yet I'd wonder if such injustice predates this named social construct. We can see this in ourselves, as we're courageous enough and willing to reflect and know this.

We also know this isn't the sum of us, there's more to us than only this, there's more, deeper. Some days it seems clearer or closer than others.

We know we come into being not by, or of, our own will. We can understand our life is a gift given. We receive it, not knowing exactly how we come to be. As our life continues, a good deal of it is sustained and maintained without our conscious knowing or input.

In this gift of life resides identity. Identity preceding our thinking or constructing. Identity founded in that which brings us into being – in this place we might name this God.

This **is**, we **are**, we cannot aspire to it or attain it, for its already given.

We **can** let it be who we are - the hardest thing of all is to give up our resistance, to forfeit what we've constructed and known as our life.

John's Jesus draws us closer and deeper, invites and includes all of who we are, of what we can do, of how we can be. This, yes, repetitive bread of life metaphor, expands and includes insights that arise, an 'and' to our understanding as it evolves, not an 'or.' Of course, we're to do all in our power to alleviate suffering **and** influence and agitate to overturn the systems that cause suffering. **And** do so attentively, consciously, aware of the lure of self-gratification, of self-aggrandisement, of our tendency to impose our will to fit things to **our** version of right. **And** all the while remembering, maybe, one day, more than we forget, we do this because this is who we are, we're made to be this way. Our identity, our very life resides in the life of God, creating, sustaining desiring the flourishing of all that comes into being. By giving up our life, forfeiting our resistance we flourish into being who we are, and take our part in making real the life of God in the world.