

## **21<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B (2024)**

There seems to be barely a day goes by without a story in the news about someone, or a group of people, having been offended by the words of another: whether it be the expression of a valid, though controversial, opinion on social media, or the deliberate attempts to provoke or cause offence, in a world so polarized by competing ideologies, it is hardly surprising that our society is so divided at the moment. The recent riots have shown how the actions of keyboard warriors have stoked the fires of prejudice, and caused many people to fall foul of the law because they have jumped on a bandwagon, and not been judicious in seeking to sift the truth from the lies – another consequence of the relativisation of truth in our secular culture. This, in turn, has led to the reigniting of the debate about freedom of speech, and the demand from some that we must all be completely free to express ourselves, however abhorrent and offensive our opinions might be. Here, the words of the C20th century author and critic, George Orwell, apply to both sides of the argument: ‘Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear’.

Over the past few Sundays, we have been reading through the sixth chapter of S. John’s Gospel, in which Jesus teaches us about the Bread of Life: the Church understands this to be S. John’s eucharistic treatise, because of its references to eating the Flesh of Jesus and drinking his Blood, which we do in mystery every time we receive Holy Communion at Mass. But what is very clear is that Jesus’

teaching about this subject divided his followers, and caused great offence. As has always been the case, so it was true in Jesus' day that religious debate would elicit a very strong reaction; and so it is hardly surprising that, in response to his insistence that his followers eat his Flesh and drink his Blood, many said, 'This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?' To the contemporary Jewish mind, the thought of drinking blood was anathema, and was strictly contrary to *kosher* food laws; but the objection of many to Jesus' teaching was that it required that to accept it, one did not only have to get one's mind around it, but that it demanded commitment from body and soul as well. In teaching his followers about the Bread of Life in such visceral terms, Jesus had completely overturned the accepted religious world-view; and, as we know when our assumptions are challenged, it is often easier to dismiss what challenges us, and not think about it anymore, rather than embrace what will undoubtedly be a costly change in both our outlook and our behaviour. It's no wonder that so many of Jesus' followers walked away.

But S. John's inclusion of this divisive and controversial teaching in his Gospel is paramount to his understanding of who Jesus is, to his Christology. John began his Gospel by asserting that the Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us; the Word became flesh, and not an idea, a spirituality, a feeling or an experience. In the Christian faith the material matters, and body and soul are of equal importance: it should therefore not surprise us that, in the Sacraments of the

Church, God should use material things – bread, wine, water, oil and human touch – to be the vehicles that convey his life and grace to the human spirit; just as, in Jesus Christ, we worship and follow a living Person, the risen Son of God, and not a philosophical proposition or a nebulous ideology of human construction, subject to interpretation and change.

And, just as Jesus' teachings shocked and challenged the people of his own day, so Christian doctrine continues to confront the secular agenda and our own assumptions and ideas with the definitive and objective truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Though his teaching on the Bread of Life is neither offensive nor particularly challenging to those whose Christian lives are formed and sustained by their weekly attendance at Mass, other elements of Jesus' own teaching and those of the Church are not quite so easy to accept, as they confront our preconceived ideas of how things are and should be, and call into question the messy compromises by which we so often live our lives, however well we know that those compromises are contrary to the law and love of God.

But, as those who would follow Jesus Christ and place our hope and trust in his mercy, we need to be acutely aware that the life that we are called to live is one that is necessarily incompatible with the world around us; and we need equally to be aware that Jesus is not and will never be the champion of human fashions and obsessions. The eternal truth of the Gospel transcends all temporal politics and ideologies; and calls all people to a fundamental reorientation of our lives –

to conversion to the ways and purposes of God. And so, we don't come to church to have our secularly-informed opinions and world-view confirmed, but rather to be conformed to Jesus Christ. As S. Paul exhorted the Romans, so he exhorts us: 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect'. Our minds are renewed, and our eyes opened to the will of God, and to what is good, beautiful and true, by the grace that works within us to convert us from the self-centred insistence that my ego is all that matters, and that God is an adjunct to our lives when we want or need him, to the fulness and freedom of life in Christ, which calls for us to acknowledge that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness and of daily repentance, so that we might become more Christ-like, as grace perfects nature; more like the Lord whom we receive at the altar, who alone speaks the words of eternal life.

Jesus' teachings continue to surprise and confound us, and so they should, because they are divine, and speak to the truth and mystery of things as they really are, and not as we would so often rather have them be. Likewise, many people cannot accept Jesus' teachings and, indeed, find them intolerable, because they challenge the *status quo*, and demand both personal repentance and societal change. But the Church's task is always to tell people what is true, and not what makes them feel nice; and to preach the Gospel in season and out of season – the challenging call to true freedom that many do not want to hear. Amen.