

Sermon 18th August 2024

I wonder if anyone here has ever read the novel **Dracula**, by Bram Stoker? I read it when I was about 21, and it was the era of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which was basically a teen drama full of teen hormones. I expected to find in Dracula a whole load of sexual desire and lust brimming off the pages; instead I found a rather conventional Victorian novel which is tame by modern standards.

Dracula is a vampire who goes about biting the necks of young ladies and drinking their blood.

Sound familiar? Yes, **it's a bit awkward**. When we read the words in John's gospel of eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood, it's rather uncomfortable. I've never particularly felt a calling to be a vampire...

That's why it's so important for us to understand the **context**, the **history**, the **ideas** of that time in history, and **not to read our ideas back** into this ancient text! Dracula dates to 1897 – John's gospel is 1800 years older, and I assure you, **John had never heard of a vampire!**

Indeed, look at the evidence: the Jewish leaders, when told they should eat the flesh of Jesus, begin to **argue among themselves**. They have the law of Moses, which ABSOLUTELY FORBIDS them from drinking blood. If Jesus had just said "become a cannibal", they would lynch him. Instead, they argue among themselves. They understand that **Jesus is using metaphors, that he's playing an intellectual game**, not talking about digging bits out of his arm to feed them!

So what ideas and context might Jesus be using?

Let's take a trip to **Deuteronomy 8:3** "...understand that one **does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.**" This is a verse the teachers of the law would have known by heart, and so the connection between words from God's mouth and bread was obvious to them.

So in the time of Jesus, the idea of the **Word of God being BREAD** and **something we can EAT** was common place! Jesus was connecting directly into these ideas.

And the context of all this is that, at the beginning of this whole discourse that we've been reading for 3 weeks, was the **feeding of the 5000 by Jesus, where he took bread and fed many hungry mouths.**

In other words, Jesus is saying "you know I fed 5000 people using bread? You know that bread will perish, and people will be hungry again? Well I have other bread I can give you. And it's like the bread and food that Moses gave – it leads you to **righteousness** and eternal life. I suggest you eat that bread!"

Let's also remember that Jesus is rather fond of parallels. I am the bread of life. I am the Vine. I am the gate. I am the shepherd. Jesus is often contrasting himself to things the people of his day understood.

So Jesus is saying **you need to eat his flesh (meaning in the context of the whole chapter, feed yourself with the wisdom and words and teaching he gives), and drink his blood** (because in the Old Testament, in Leviticus, blood is a clear reference to Life. Life is in blood). **So drink in his words and trust in his blood, and you'll find life.**

Proverbs supports this: gain wisdom and you gain life! It is and always has been God's will for us to learn to live wisely, by God's standards and ways.

I have a friend who, at the tender age of around 25, once said to me **"I want to be wise"**. And he even then so impressed me – when I was busy seeking self glory, he dedicated his life to **servicing people in Malawi**. He learned French, he diligently helped steward charitable giving towards projects that helped people. He visited projects on the ground. And since then, he has travelled extensively and now has an incredibly exciting life where he's worked on Ebola in Africa and £7 million projects in Lebanon. He is **living a wise life, placing first in his decisions the service of some of the world's most needy people.**

So Jesus is saying: **read my words, hear my words, do my words, and you will have my life.** You'll even be raised up: a reference to the resurrection of Jesus and to our own part in his new life.

It's worth remembering this too when we have **eucharist**. We talk of the body and blood of Christ – this does not **need** to be understood literally! This rich symbolic language points us to feeding on the source of life, Jesus Christ himself.

How do we feed on the source of life, Jesus Christ himself?

It is by **hearing his words, learning his words, and doing his words**. It is through the **practices and rhythms of prayer and worship**. It is, strangely, through the **body of Christ**, this broken and messy thing called the **Christian church!**

Through all of this, we become his **disciples**, find a place for **healing**, find a place for **home**, find a place for **family**, and find a place for **purpose**.

This is in many ways what Paul too is saying in Ephesians. He warns us: the days are evil! They are not for your benefit. So be wise and on guard, because wolves are out there prowling around waiting to get you.

How might we fall victim?

Well, Paul mentions **alcohol!** First, Paul is not talking about a nice glass of wine at dinner. He's talking about many nice glasses of wine!

The love of being drunk is not a modern thing: 2000 years ago, people adored it, and going back to the dawn of humanity, getting drunk has been a popular past time. **But what are the fruits?**

Liver disease? Doing things you regret the next day? When I was a student, I heard people say “I need alcohol to relax”, but if you need it to relax, **is there not a deeper problem?** It’s basically numbing ourselves...surely we would want to master ourselves and be able to relax without a ‘drug’?

If we are to be sharp, and awake, and disciplined, we don’t really want to dull our minds with alcohol, but to **rejoice in the senses we have and to embrace life in its fullest.**

Paul would also point to how we use our time. TV can be a blessing from time to time, but how often do we let entertainment dictate our timetables? I wonder if we are awake to the waste of time that is so much of modern life? ‘Streaming services’ sound good, but they play on the basis of you being a mini god. Real life comes from making God, God.

Anyone remember a series called “Breaking Bad”? It was hugely popular (I’ve never seen it), but now its 16 years old, from 2008! We’ve had *Game of Thrones*, *The Sopranos*, *Downton Abbey*, and now there is one called *Bridgerton*...all of it seems so important right now, but a year from now, was it really that vital? What if the time spent binging on *Lord of the Rings* was instead spent **learning French, understanding** the human body, **visiting** an **elderly** person, or, heaven forbid (!), **studying the Bible?!**

Because if we learn anything from Jesus, it’s that **you are what you eat.** If you **feed on the teaching, words and actions of Jesus, you will become like Jesus,** and he will work in you and build his purposes in your life.

But if you feed on intrigue and deception, plots about murderers, violent thrillers and lots of swearing, **that is what will start to come out.** That is what you will start to think about, and then you’ll be surprised as it starts to come out of your mouth.

Hear me clearly: this is not to make anyone feel guilty. The Lord knows I have watched a huge amount of dumb drivel in my life! And sometimes **it can really help** us escape and relax.

But if we do that too much, there is a problem. **We’re not called to escape from this world, but to be salt and light within it.** The problems of this world are not to be **run from, but transformed by the healing and reconciling power of Jesus, working through...YOU!**

That’s why Paul says be filled with the Spirit of God, sing psalms and hymns, and give thanks to God at all times. What he means is: if you are placing worship, remembrance of what Jesus has done for you, and the words of Jesus consistently in your mind, you will find this shapes whom you become and how you see the world.

As we go into this new week, let us consider: we are what we eat and drink....so are we eating and drinking Jesus, or something else? Because what we eat determines who we become.