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**Saint Margaret's Uniting Church,  
Mooroolbark**

**The Service of the Lord's Day**

**19 August 2018 - Pentecost 13**

**Minister: Rev Dr Barry Brown**

**We Gather to Worship God**

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE WURUNDJERI PEOPLE

PLEASE STAND AS THE BIBLE IS CARRIED IN

GREETING and CALL TO WORSHIP

WE SING *"Christ be our light! Shine in our hearts..."* ATO 313

*Christ be our Light!*

*Shine in our hearts.*

*Shine through the darkness.*

*Christ be our Light!*

*Shine in Your Church gathered today*

Longing for peace - our world is troubled.

Longing for hope - many despair

Your Word alone has pow'r to save us.

Make us Your living voice!

Longing for food - many are hungry.

Longing for water - many still thirst.

Make us Your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed.

Longing for shelter - many are homeless

Longing for warmth - many are cold.

Make us Your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of Living stones.

Many the gifts - many the people,

Many the hearts - that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making Your Kingdom come.

PRAYER OF ADORATION and CONFESSION

## **We Listen to God's Word:**

AN EARLY WORD

"Wilfred Gordon MacDonald Partridge: - Mem Fox. Read by Karen White

PRAYER WITH THE CHILDREN

PSALM 111 [New Revised Standard Version – Read Responsively]

Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,

**in the company of the upright, in the congregation.**

Great are the works of the Lord,

**studied by all who delight in them.**

Full of honour and majesty is his work,

**and his righteousness endures forever.**

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;

**the Lord is gracious and merciful.**

He provides food for those who fear him;

**he is ever mindful of his covenant.**

He has shown his people the power of his works,

**in giving them the heritage of the nations.**

The works of his hands are faithful and just;

**all his precepts are trustworthy.**

They are established forever and ever,

**to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.**

He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.

**Holy and awesome is his name.**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

**The Lord's praise endures forever.**

THE GOSPEL READING – John 6:51 – 58

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, *"Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."*

WE SING *"Break now the bread of life..."* TiS 429

1

Break now the bread of life,  
dear Lord, to me,  
as once you broke the loaves  
beside the sea;  
beyond the sacred page  
I seek you, Lord,  
my spirit longs for you,  
O living Word.

2

Bless your own truth, dear Lord,  
to me, to me  
as when you blessed the bread  
by Galilee;  
then shall all bondage cease,  
all shackles fall,  
and I shall find my peace,  
my all in all.

## THE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

# "Flesh – Abide - Life

Sermon by Rev Dr Barry Brown, 19 August 2018, (John 6:51–58)

[This manuscript sermon has been prepared as the basis of a preached sermon. The latter will have been in a briefer and adapted form. It is published in this longer form for those wishing to have a copy, and will also be posted on Saint Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark's website].

John 6:51 (NRSV)

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

## Introduction:

You may have noticed that while we are in The Year of Mark, we have diverted from Mark for a few Sundays (5 in all) to consider John chapter 6. The Rev Ron Gordon introduced this chapter a few weeks ago and attended particularly to Jesus' words, "I am the Bread of Life." Two weeks ago the Rev Arnie Wierenga continued the reflection on this theme, attending to the immersing act of sharing as we prepared to participate together in the Eucharist. Arnie commented: "This is an invitation into the hospitality of God. This is not the moment to work out a deep Eucharistic theology (although there is a time and place for that).

Well, today is a day to consider 'a deep Eucharistic theology' – not so much because I choose to take this approach, but because the Gospel text for today leaves us with no option. It is not any easy passage, and it requires some deep consideration. One commentator, Gail O'Day, called today's Gospel Reading "... the most controversial and hotly debated verses in the Fourth Gospel." I will therefore take a little extra time by way of Introduction. I will then focus on three (3) key words in John's Gospel (Flesh, Abide & Life). I will close by suggesting the verse of a hymn as a Prayer for the Week.

In 1989 I spent the northern summer at a seminary in San Francisco. Around sixty people attended the summer school from all over the USA, Australia and South Korea. We all spoke English – but sometimes in very different ways. It was surprising to discover the number of words that were used in common, but with very different meanings. Turning from Mark's Gospel to John's is similar. John uses different words to describe the same or similar notions in the Synoptic Gospels. For example: John uses the word 'sign' where Mark would use 'miracle'. He uses the word 'belief' rather than 'faith.' John uses the word 'Life of Eternal Life' where Mark uses the term 'Kingdom of God' (and Matthew, 'Kingdom of Heaven'). And John also has some words not found in the three synoptic gospels as having particular meaning: 'Word', 'Flesh', 'Abide', 'My Hour', 'My Glory' and most important, as we have noted, 'Life' or 'Eternal Life.' We shall attend to three of these Johannine words in what follows.

Real estate agents talk about three important things concerning the sale of a property: Position, position, position! When considering any passage of Scripture we need to consider: Context, context, context! John's Gospel has two primary contexts: (1) it is a telling of the story of Jesus; but probably more important in this telling; (2) John's Christian community (late 1st century, possibly near Ephesus) is dealing with separation, possibly expulsion, from Synagogue under the leadership of an emerging form of ultra conservative Judaism (post the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE). Understanding this is important for at least two reasons.

First, and this is important: John uses the term 'The Jews' in several places in his Gospel, including today's passage – "The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" Now scholars are not able to give a precise explanation concerning John's meaning of 'The Jews.' However, it is fairly clear this was not a racial, nor even a strictly religious reference. Most likely John community was made up of Jewish Christians who until very recently understood themselves as part of Judaism. What seems to be likely is that Christian Jews had been declared heretics and were no longer welcome at Synagogue. Those referred to as 'The Jews' are most likely the hard-liners of the Jewish community who had instigated this painful separation. Unfortunately, in the past, this terminology has been linked with antisemitism; and this we need to be careful to avoid.

Second: The institution of the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, features at the last meal of Jesus with the disciples in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). John does not record such an institution, but uses this chapter to provide a deep theological reflection upon the meaning of this well-established Christian tradition and practice. John is not presenting an 'alternative' to the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), but a complementary understanding centred on the fullness of the Incarnation. The notion of the Incarnation ("the Word became flesh and lived among us" – John 1:14) is central to John's Gospel as a whole.

John chapter six needs to be read and understood as a whole. John 6 is a very carefully crafted chapter, characterized by a tight interweaving of narrative and discourse. The chapter comprises several interrelated part:

6:1 – 15 Miracle (Bread & Fish – Crowd)

6:16 – 21 Miracle (Walking on Water – Disciples)

6:22 – 24 Transition to Capernaum

6:15 – 34 Dialogue (Crowd)

6:35 – 59 Discourse (Crowd and Disciples)

(vs 51 – 58 has a focus on flesh)

6:60 – 71 Conclusion (Disciples alone)

I have also observed that during these five weeks considering John 6 there has been some overlap of verses in the weekly selection of passages to be read. Being one of several to preach from this chapter at Mooroolbark, and again next Sunday at Heathmont, I have been particularly mindful of this, and keen to be aware of how others have approached their consideration of the readings.

May I suggest that it is helpful, in understanding today's passage, you might take the time at home to read John chapter six as a whole.

The chapter as a whole is linked with Passover festival, which was near (Jn 6: 4), and this provided the context for discussion concerning what it means to be fed, sustained, by God. The rituals of Passover point beyond the visible symbols to the sustaining provision of God. And in narrating this chapter, John, as elsewhere, uses symbolic language, metaphor and idioms that point beyond the observable to a more profound truth and meaning. This we need to attend to in considering this passage, including some of John's key words and their meaning.

## **Flesh**

The notion of eating the flesh of Jesus seems grotesque to many. Non-Christians are critical of this and have even referred to it as a form of cannibalism. People of other Faiths have a similar view. And many Protestants also shy away from this language because it might be associated with aspects 'Catholicism' in which the bread of the Eucharist is considered to become the actual 'flesh' of Jesus.

In preparing for this sermon I turned to several commentaries. In doing so I observed that I own more than a dozen on John's Gospel. My commentary collection on John starting in the early 1960s when I studied John's Gospel for Adult Matriculation. The most recent volume was purchased in December last year. In earlier commentaries there was a divide along Catholic & Protestant lines. Dogma played a major part in Biblical interpretation. However, since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Biblical scholarship in the Catholic tradition has become less dogmatic; and Protestant scholars have become less defensive in their interpretation. The result being a convergence of Biblical scholarship.

Now this is important for our passage. It is important to be aware of John's preference for and use of symbolism, metaphor and idiom. Literalism misses the point in understanding John's Gospel, including reference to the words 'my flesh'. The word flesh (flesh and blood) in John Gospel means 'Jesus in the flesh' – Jesus as a physical being in space and time ("And the Word became flesh and lived among us"). The word 'flesh' occurs 11 times in John's Gospel; six (6) of these are in today's reading. The focus intended is on the notion of being fed and sustained by Jesus – not as food that he gives; but his self-giving, of his very self – in his life and death.

I again quote Gail O'Day: "The Word becoming flesh is the decisive event in human history – indeed, in the history of creation – because the incarnation changes God's relationship to humanity and humanity's relationship to God. The incarnation means that human beings can see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible. The Father-Son relationship of God and Jesus is the key to this changed relationship. God's Son, because he is the incarnate Word, derives his identity from God (Jn 1:1, 18). The relationship between the divine and human is transformed, because in the incarnation human beings are given intimate, palpable, corporeal access to the cosmic reality of God' (NIB Vol 9, p 524).

The whole of John's Gospel, including reference to partaking of the flesh of Jesus, clearly symbolic language, is premised on the understanding of the Incarnation – that is Jesus the "Word became flesh and lived among us." I don't understand that fully. But that does not mean I cannot believe it.

The Rev Dr Norman Young was my theological professor in the 1960s. In recent years I have come to know him in a different context. We are both part of a small group of 'Old Revs' (my term) who meet monthly for lunch and conversation. I recall Dr Young explaining that it was normal for him to conclude his series of lectures on 'The Incarnation' by quoting a hymn by Charles Wesley. We shall sing this hymn following this sermon. However, note the words in two selected verses:

Let earth and heaven combine,  
their voices all agree,  
to praise in songs divine  
the incarnate deity,  
our God contracted to a span,  
incomprehensibly made Man.

He deigns in flesh to appear,  
widest extremes to join;  
to bring our vileness near,  
and make us all divine:  
and we the life of God shall know,  
for God is manifest below.

## **Abide**

John's Gospel records Jesus stressing that "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (v56). Abiding is a key word in John's Gospel. Here (Jn 6:56) is the first of 13 times the word abide is used in John. It is best remembered for the notion of 'staying connected' as a branch to the vine, in John chapter 15. Various translations use differing English words to translate the Greek word *menō*: - Abide, Remain, Dwell (continually) and to Live in.

Gail O'Day comments: "This verb expresses the interrelationship of Jesus and the believer that is the source of the believer's life. Yet the interrelationship of Jesus and the believer is actually an extension of the relationship of God and Jesus... "The believer shares (participates in) the life of Jesus and God..." To share in the Eucharistic meal is not to remember or commemorate one particular event, but to share in all of Jesus' life, including ultimately his death. Participation in the Eucharist creates a relationship between Jesus and believer (Jn 6:56) that contains within it the promise of new life" (Jn 6:57).

Melbourne Catholic scholar, Brendan Byrne, comments: "Such a faith-inspired vision flows into a life-giving participation in the Eucharist, where sacramental communion with the flesh and blood of Jesus involves union not only with him in the static sense, but also being caught up in the rhythm of his sacrificial love for the world."

In our 'Service of the Lord's Day' in Uniting in Worship, there is a rubric (1) which reads: -"Christian worship is God's gift whereby we participate through the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father. Thus we are called as the people of God with the gifts the Spirit has distributed among us, to take part in what Christ ... has done and continues to do for us. So the bread which we break is a participation in the body of Christ, and the cup we take is a participation in the blood of Christ.

It is also instructive to note that in the Guide (the rubric) to 'The Service of the Lord's Day' in Uniting in Worship the regular weekly service assumes, as the norm, the inclusion of 'The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper' (Holy Communion, The Eucharist), but allows for occasions "when this is omitted". Some Uniting Church congregations do celebrate weekly communion. However, for many, the Eucharist is celebrated monthly. Some congregations, however, even though they do not celebrate the Eucharist weekly, acknowledge the centrality of the Lord's Supper by having the communion cup and plate centrally visible on the communion table.

The point is that the Eucharist is at the heart of Christian worship, and of our life together as a Christians. This central act of worship and community is a profound means of grace in which we respond to Jesus' call to abide in him: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56).

## **Life**

John's Gospel has been called the Gospel of Life. The word Life (sometimes Eternal Life) is used 36 times in John compared with 16 in the three Synoptic Gospels together. It is also use 13 times in the three Letters of John.

The particular term Eternal Life is used 17 times in John's Gospel. However, even when Life is used without this qualification, it does not normally refer to ordinary life, for which 'psyche' is use where death is the terminus.

In John chapter six the word Life is used 12 times; five of these are specifically qualified as 'Eternal Life' but on most other occasions this is implied.

As life is a human's most precious possession, so Eternal Life is used as the symbol of the most precious of divine gifts lying beyond human reach. God's greatest gift is for humans to share (participate) in the Life of God. Eternal life is the life that God lives and which Jesus lives because of his relationship with the Father. The notion of Life, Eternal Life' is the key theme of John's Gospel and frames that Gospel as a whole. The Prologue (Jn 1:4): "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the all people..." And the Conclusion (assuming chapter 21 to be an appendix, as I do), John 20:31: "... these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that thorough believing you may have life in his name".

## Close

Let me close by attending just a little more to John's reference to Eternal Life. I can do no better than use words from one of my most admired theologians, Jürgen Moltmann. As a young man in Germany, Moltmann was press-ganged into Hitler's army in 1944. The following year (the year I was born) he took the opportunity to surrender to the allied forces. At this time he had no interest in Christianity. As a captive German soldier he spent time as a prisoner of war in Belgium, Scotland and England. While at Kilmarnock in Scotland, and Cuchney (near Nottingham) in England he was introduced to several Christian families who provided weekend hospitality to prisoners. He was also given a copy of The Psalms and the New Testament. Through these, and the love and prayers of those who cared for him, he came to know Christ. He later explained, "I didn't find Christ, he found me!" After the war he returned to Germany and went on to study, then teach theology.

Moltmann has been teaching and writing throughout the full span of my ministry. My introduction to his most famous book, *Theology of Hope*, was published in 1967. This was the first year of my ministry as a Methodist Home Missionary. This book influenced the writing of my ordination thesis in 1973, and has shaped my theological thinking ever since. Just over a year ago I purchased Moltmann's latest book, written just before his 90th birthday – *The Living God: and the Fullness of Life*. I now quote directly from this book:

"Eternal life is here and now. This present life, this joyful and painful, loved and suffered, successful and unsuccessful life, is eternal life. In the incarnation of Christ, God has accepted this human life and interpenetrated it, reconciled and healed it, and qualified it with immortality. We do not live a merely earthly life, and not only a human life, but simultaneously also live the life that is divine, eternal, and infinite. Eternal life is not endless life but life that is filled with God, life in abundance (John 10:10). Eternity is a divine qualification of human life, not its endless prolongation. To experience just a moment of divine eternity is more than to have survived many years. That is what the Gospel of John means by the presence of eternal life. "Whoever believes has eternal life (Jn 6:47); "Those who believe in me, even though they died, will live" (Jn 11:25).

But it is not human faith that acquires eternal life. Eternal life is God-given, and is present in every human life; but it is the believer who perceives it... We shall die into this open, divine life. For us, our death is the end of our mortal life, but for the divine life in which we have lived, loved, and suffered it is a transition from mortality to immortality, and from transience to what is everlasting." (Jürgen Moltmann: *The Living God: and Fullness of Life*, Ch 4 'This Eternal Life' (pp 74 & 76)

And now, a Suggested Prayer for the Week:

Bread of heaven, on you we feed,  
for your flesh is food indeed:  
ever may our souls be fed  
with this true and living bread,  
day by day with strength supplied  
through the life of him who died.

[TIS 513, v1 John Conder, 1789-1855 alt.]

## We Respond to God's Word:

WE SING "*Let earth and heaven combine...*" TIS 305

1

Let earth and heaven combine,  
their voices all agree,  
to praise in songs divine  
the incarnate deity,  
our God contracted to a span,  
incomprehensibly made Man.

2

Unsearchable the love  
that has the Saviour brought;  
the grace is far above  
our own or angels' thought:  
enough for us that God, we know,

our God, is manifest below.

3

He deigns in flesh to appear,  
widest extremes to join;  
to bring our vileness near  
and make us all divine:  
and we the life of God shall know,  
for God is manifest below.

4

Made perfect first in love,  
and sanctified by grace,  
we shall from earth remove,  
and see his glorious face:  
then shall his love be fully showed,  
and we shall then be lost in God.

]

THE OFFERING and PRAYER of DEDICATION

CHURCH NEWS, NOTICES and SHARING TIME

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE and THE LORD'S PRAYER

***Our Father in heaven,*** [ELLC]  
***hallowed be your name,***  
***your kingdom come,***  
***your will be done,***  
***on earth as in heaven.***  
***Give us today our daily bread.***  
***Forgive us our sins***  
***as we forgive those who sin against us.***  
***Save us from the time of trial***  
***and deliver us from evil.***  
***For the kingdom, the power, and the glory***  
***are yours now and for ever. Amen.***

THE CHILDREN SHOW AND TELL OF THEIR ACTIVITY

## **The Sending Forth of the People of God**

A READING FROM THE LETTERS – Ephesians 5:15 – 20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

WORDS OF MISSION, BLESSING and SENDING, ending

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:  
**In the name of Christ. Amen.**

WE SING "Guide me, O thou great Redeemer..." TiS 569

1

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,  
pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand;  
bread of heaven, bread of heaven,  
feed me now and evermore,

feed me now and evermore.

2

Open now the crystal fountain  
whence the living waters flow:  
let the fiery, cloudy pillar  
lead me all my journey through:  
strong deliverer, strong deliverer,  
be thou still my strength and shield,  
be thou still my strength and shield.

3

When I tread the verge of Jordan  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
death of death, and hell's destruction,  
land me safe on Canaan's side:  
songs of praises, songs of praises  
I will ever give to thee,  
I will ever give to thee.

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**A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK (TiS 513):**

Bread of heaven, on you we feed,  
for your flesh is food indeed:  
ever may our souls be fed  
with this true and living bread,  
day by day with strength supplied  
through the life of him who died.

Words by John Conder, 1789-1855, alt.