

Sermon for 12th Sunday after Trinity by Geoffrey Howard, 23rd August 2015

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you, these words remind me of two parishioners in my last parish – Michael and Charlie – very different people, but with one thing in common.

Michael, a retired civil servant, had held a senior post in the Customs and Excise, he was a man of great ability who generously used his administrative skills for the benefit of the community: he was Chairman of the Board of Governors of the village school, Chairman of the Village Hall Committee, Chairman of the local Magistrates, and he played a vital part in the annual Open Gardens' Day which was the church's main fund-raiser. He was just as reliable at tackling the menial jobs, such as tidying up the church yard or spring cleaning the church. Together with Olwen, his wife, he was rarely absent from the weekly Eucharist. I had the highest regard for Michael and I thank God for his wise counsel and unstinting support. He was the kind of parishioner every parson dreams of.

Charlie had worked all his life as a carpenter in the building trade, he was a quiet, self-effacing man who took little part in the village activities. In his youth he had played in a local dance band and his greatest joy was scraping a tune out of his somewhat battered fiddle. Like Michael, Charlie could be depended on to be present at the Sunday Eucharist.

Both Michael and Charlie had Nonconformist backgrounds and that may have contributed to the fact that neither of them ever took Communion, in the five years I was in the parish they never received the bread and wine from my hands, and I doubt if they had ever received the Sacrament from anyone else's hands either. I once asked Charlie why and he replied, *I'm not good enough. But Charlie,* I protested, *if we had to be good enough to take communion, we would all be excluded. When we say, "we are not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under thy table", that's nothing else but the plain truth.*

It did no good, Charlie, like Michael, never changed.

I wonder if I ever told Charlie of an incident in the ministry of Alexander Whyte, an eminent Presbyterian divine in Edinburgh a century ago. In those days, perhaps they still do, Presbyterian churches celebrated the Eucharist only once a year; a great occasion with the elders out in force and the church packed to capacity. One year Whyte noticed a woman in tears at the back of the church, she had not taken communion. Seizing a chalice and paten, he marched up the aisle, held them out to her and said, *Take it, woman, it's for sinners.*

All the Charlies of this world should have those words engraved on their hearts. *Take it, it's for sinners.*

It was only after his death that I discovered what Michael's problem had been. Olwen told me he couldn't stand the idea of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. The thought repelled him. If I had known this before he died, I might have told him of the time King David was at war with the Philistines, they had captured and occupied his native town of Bethlehem. David and his men took refuge in the cave of Adullam, a thieves hideout in the mountains. Depressed and homesick, David exclaimed, *O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem.* That night three of his men who had overheard him went into enemy territory and brought him the precious water. But David could not drink it, to him it was priceless, so he poured it onto the ground, a libation to God, saying, *Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives.*

As far as David was concerned his friends had poured their very life-blood into that water and it was so precious that only God was fit to receive it. His words were uttered despite the fact that all Jews of his day, and most Jews today, regarded the ingestion of blood with horror and repugnance, that's why there are kosher butchers. No Jew would ever make the mistake of thinking that David literally meant the water had been turned into blood, rather it was a potent symbol of his friends' devotion and self-sacrifice.

I wish also that I had told Michael that I once read that the actions of Jesus in breaking the bread and pouring out the wine before blessing them at the Last Supper were simply what every Jewish father of his day would have done at a family meal. Our Lord was not doing anything unusual, but that which was commonplace in a devout Jewish household. He would have seen his own father, Joseph, after working all day, his back aching from stooping over his bench, his hands calloused from gripping the tools of his trade, take bread and wine, break and pour and bless, then invite his family to eat. I have a feeling that Joseph could well have said when he was doing this, *I've poured my life into this bread and wine, I slaved away all day at my carpenter's bench so that you might be fed.* A loving parent might say the same to their children today, *The whole purpose of my life is to feed and clothe and educate you. I've poured all I possess into the food that is set before you.* And if any parent did say that I don't think the children would be repelled by that food. Indeed they might well exclaim, *My mother's, my father's, life is in this food, my goodness, it must be special.* I wish I'd had the opportunity of saying to Michael, *These words of Jesus do not belong to the realm of physiology but of poetry, they are to remind us of Jesus' self-sacrifice and of the love and grace which still sustain us.*

I do not criticise Michael and Charlie. They were both men of great integrity and I valued both of them. Indeed their very reluctance to participate in the Communion might have been a tribute to their integrity. Yet, having said this, I think they missed out, as do the Quakers and the Salvationists who do not celebrate this sacrament. I console myself that Jesus assures us that another feast awaits us, The Marriage Feast of the Lamb, my two friends will certainly be there and I hope I shall be there too.

Michael and Charlie, and all other good and puzzled people, may light perpetual shine upon you, may you rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.