

**The 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year B: God's most wonderful gift – Himself.**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Proverbs 9:1-6: God's Wisdom feeds, and thus offers life;**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Ephesians 5:15-20: Act as intelligent – not senseless - people;**  
**Gospel: John 6:51-59: Jesus' flesh & blood are real food & drink – but how?**

At last, we come to the most important piece of Jesus' teaching in this part of the gospel: what the Eucharist means in the life of each Christian. But before we go there, it is worth looking briefly at the first reading, as this sort of material is what Jesus and other rabbis would have used in their daily teaching. It is from the Book of Proverbs, one of the early "Wisdom" books in the Old Testament. Sharing this sort of writing with other cultures in the area, the Jews interpreted "Wisdom" as sensible, moral living, and what this would mean in practice. With their belief in the one God, Jews did not separate "Wisdom" from God's presence, and at times it almost meant God Himself.

In this Sunday's reading, "Wisdom" is a female power that acts on behalf of God: she builds an elaborate house (with seven pillars!), prepares a table, cooks meat and pours wine, then sends her servants to all and sundry, to invite them to the dinner. But she is no snob: she tells the 'ignorant' to "*step this way*"; to the 'fool', she says: "*Come and eat my bread & drink my wine; leave your folly and you will live. Walk in the ways of perception.*" This is not just a freebie: there is a moral purpose to her invitation, since she wants people to be improved – both morally & intellectually - by her meal. Can we see where this is leading?

It is leading up to the famous gospel extract. John told us in Chapter 1 that Jesus was the "*Word – or Wisdom – made flesh, who dwelt amongst us*" (1:14), and here Jesus also invites us to a feast, just as "Lady Wisdom" had done in the first reading. Unlike the other three gospel-writers, John does not mention the giving of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Instead, he tells us what the Supper meant: the idea that we serve others practically, as Jesus did, when he washed the disciples' feet (13:1-15). Here in Chapter 6, he gives Jesus' solemn teaching on what the Eucharist does for us: it lets us share the sort of divine life that he has with God the Father. Although the Eucharist is not mentioned by name, it is obviously meant here. All Christian readers of the gospel would realise that, just as the gospel's author would have intended.

Jesus identified the bread used in the sacrament as his "*flesh, (given) for the life of the world*". This caused his hearers to ask (not unreasonably): "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" At first hearing, the whole idea seems either barmy or - worse – cannibalistic. Later in the extract, Jesus explained that this is a spiritual (not simply physical) presence: "*As I, who am sent by the living Father, draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me.*" (6:57). In other words, in this sacrament, we take a spiritual part – but also a true one – in Jesus' relationship with the God the Father.

Here, I must tread carefully, as I know that many non-Catholics who read these notes do not share the RC Church's interpretation of what Jesus said. The key verses are 6:55-56: "*My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in him.*" The RC Church interprets this to mean that, in Holy Communion, we share truly and genuinely in the life of Jesus, because God's divine power, working through the Holy Spirit, makes the "stuff" on the altar (bread & wine) change its very nature, or substance, into that of Jesus' divine presence. At the same time, the physical side – the shape, texture, smell, chemical properties, etc. – stays the same.

In the 1500's, the Reformers rejected this, to varying degrees. Luther believed in a sort of 'real presence', but denied the catholic belief that the substance of the bread & wine changed in to that of Jesus Christ. Those who later became Presbyterians (starting with Zwingli, then Calvin) went much further. They said the bread & wine were merely symbolic of Jesus' death, and while still important, were in no way to be 'worshipped' as a real presence of Jesus. I am not a professional theologian, so I hope this brief outline is accurate and fair.

For Catholic readers, I can only ask that we see this sacrament as God's most precious gift to the human race, as it allows us worldly, weak and sinful people to share in the sublime gift of Christ himself. It "works" because Jesus said (in 6:51) "*The bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.*" This relates to his self-offering on Calvary, where he was offered up "for the life of the world", in other words, our redemption. The Eucharist (or Mass) is for us a re-enactment of that one-off sacrifice on the cross, as it lets us share, despite the passage of time, in that one supreme moment in history.

We do not have to be perfect to receive this sacrament. (That was implied by the people "Wisdom" invited to her meal in the 1<sup>st</sup> reading.) Before 1914, few Catholics regularly went to Communion at Mass. Even in the 1950's, Catholic groups each had their "monthly Communion Sunday", when they had to make a big effort (meaning going to Confession first) to go to Communion. That world, rightly or wrongly, has gone. The risk now is that we take this sacrament for granted – or never bother with it at all. Yet it is the life-blood of our faith.

Perhaps St Thomas Aquinas's Communion prayer sums it up best: "This is a holy banquet indeed, in which Christ Himself is made our food. The memory of his Passion is told again. Grace fills our mind and heart, and there is given to us an assurance of the glory that one day will be ours." Perfect! *Fr Jim Dunne.*