

Trinity 12 2018 John 6: 51-58

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”*. John 6:53.

For a lot of people this verse from St John’s gospel needs a lot of explaining and lies at the root of one of the major pieces of theology that divides the Church of England from the Roman Catholic church. It leads to the great debate that has fuelled much discussion right from the time of the Reformation. At the moment of consecration in the high point of the Eucharistic Prayer, what happens?

Let us remind ourselves of the words, which we will hear shortly;

*“On the night before he died,  
he came to supper with his friends  
and, taking bread, he gave you thanks.  
He broke it and gave it to them, saying:  
Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you;  
do this in remembrance of me.  
At the end of supper, taking the cup of wine,  
he gave you thanks, and said:  
Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,  
which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.  
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”*

And this is what our Roman Catholic friends hear in the Mass every Sunday.

*“At the time he was betrayed  
and entered willingly into his Passion,*

*he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it,  
and gave it to his disciples, saying:*

***TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT OF IT,  
FOR THIS IS MY BODY,  
WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU.***

*In a similar way, when supper was ended,  
he took the chalice  
and, once more giving thanks,  
he gave it to his disciples, saying:*

*TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND DRINK FROM IT,  
FOR THIS IS THE CHALICE OF MY BLOOD,  
THE BLOOD OF THE NEW AND ETERNAL COVENANT,  
WHICH WILL BE Poured OUT FOR YOU AND FOR MANY  
FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.  
DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME.”*

Expressed slightly differently but saying the same thing. We are both doing what Jesus told us to do at the Last Supper when the Sacrament of Holy Communion was instituted;

*“Do this in remembrance of me”*, Church of England and, *“Do this in memory of me”* Roman Catholic.

But what is the real difference? What happens at the moment of consecration? What happens to the bread and wine that we bring to the altar at the Offertory? Does it change or does it stay the same? There in lies the crux of the matter.

The Roman Catholic church believes in the Doctrine of Transubstantiation which states;

*“the miraculous change by which according to Roman Catholic teaching the eucharistic elements at their consecration become the body and blood of Christ while keeping only the appearances of bread and wine”*.

The Church of England believes in the Doctrine of Real Presence. In Anglican theology, a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It looks like bread and wine and it tastes like bread and wine. In the Eucharist, the outward and visible sign is that of bread and wine, while the inward and spiritual grace is that of the Body and Blood of Christ. The classic Anglican stance with regard to the debate on the Eucharist could be summed up in the words of John Donne (1572–1631):

*"He was the Word that spake it; He took the bread and brake it; And what that Word did make it; I do believe and take it". (Divine Poems. On the Sacrament).*

In other words, we Anglicans prefer to take a more mystical and spiritual approach to the sacrament of Holy Communion and are not so keen to get bogged down in dogma. It is not a question of being right or wrong but more a question of interpretation.

The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission is an organization created in 1969 which seeks to make ecumenical progress between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. The sponsors are the Anglican Consultative Council and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In a joint statement in 1994, briefly summarised, ARCIC, said;

WE AFFIRM that in the Eucharist the Church, doing what Christ commanded his apostles to do at the Last Supper, makes present the sacrifice of Calvary.

WE AFFIRM that God has given the Eucharist to the Church as a means through which all the atoning work of Christ on the Cross is proclaimed and made present with all its effects in the life of the Church.

WE AFFIRM that Christ in the Eucharist makes himself present sacramentally and truly when under the species of bread and wine these earthly realities are changed into the reality of his body and blood.

BOTH OUR CHURCHES AFFIRM that after the Eucharistic celebration the body and blood of Christ may be reserved for communion of the sick.

WE AFFIRM that only a validly ordained priest can be the minister who, in the person of Christ, brings into being the sacrament of the Eucharist and offers sacramentally the redemptive sacrifice of Christ which God offers us.

*“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”*

Perhaps now we can put these words of John into a more contemporary perspective and truly grow and move together towards the unity that we all know to be Christ’s will for his church which is, most importantly, the Body of Christ.

Amen.