

There was a certain pastor who one Christmas received a present from a member of his congregation who wished to remain anonymous. The gift was a jar of cherries in brandy. The problem for the pastor was that this was a church that frowned upon alcohol. He wanted to thank his anonymous giver, but the only way he could do so was to say it in church during his usual Sunday notices. He needed to tell the congregation what the present was in order that the right donor was thanked, as several others used to give him little gifts at Christmas, and knowing who they were he would thank them personally. But how to thank this anonymous giver without causing offence? He quickly found a solution. He announced that he was most grateful for the gift of fruit, but even more, he appreciated the *spirit* in which it was given.

To use the term more correctly, the spirit in which something is given is always more important than the gift itself. It expresses love and connection with the receiver; it is a token of the relationship. In an important sense this is what the whole of John 6 that we have been reading during the past few weeks is all about. The chapter began with the familiar feeding of the multitude. Jesus satisfies the physical hunger of over 5,000 people. Important as it always is to meet the hunger needs of the world, this giving of food by Jesus was a token of something much greater.

That greater thing was the love of God for his people, love so great that he wished the people to enjoy a quality of life that they had never experienced before. The material food that satisfied the people was perishable. It would soon be gone, and they would be hungry again. Such food was necessary for them to live life on earth but eventually they would die. But the food God wanted for them was imperishable. This food would never run out and those who obtained it would have life in all its fullness and for ever.

The food of love that God gave to the world was Jesus himself. This is how John's Gospel presents him: The Word, the Christ, God's very being, became flesh and dwelt among us. This Gospel begins with those words. And then, there is that single verse, a summary in fact of the whole New Testament in John 3: 16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

To believe as the ancients meant it, as the New Testament and the creeds mean it, is to love, to be loyal to, to trust. To believe in Jesus meant to follow Jesus, which in turn meant to try and live as he lived and to love as he loved. We should understand it this way too. In John's metaphorical language, it means to

feed on Jesus so that he lives in us, and we live in him. It means being one with him.

‘...so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ This is not a threat, not a warning to those who have never heard of Jesus or those who seek the truth or seek God on a different path or religious tradition. This Gospel, like the whole of the New Testament, is written by a Christian to Christians, not to anyone else. To follow the food imagery, if we stop eating food we soon die. Similarly, if having tasted the spiritual food that is Jesus Christ and experienced the life he brings, we, like some of the disciples in the Gospel reading, decide that we no longer wish to walk with him, then life will somehow be less, it will be diminished, a spiritual death will have occurred.

Life in Christ is eternal life. It is about an enhanced quality of life in this world which, because we follow a risen Lord, we may also hope to enjoy beyond this earthly life. But because God so loves the world, and God in Christ became flesh and blood and lived among us, it is this life, this world which, as Christians, should always be our chief concern: how we are to live, how we are to love, how we are to bring Christ to others, how we who share the spiritual food of eternal life, Jesus himself, can be ourselves that food for others, that they too may come to know the love of God, and find a quality of life which is so satisfying, in a way it never was when they lived mainly for the flesh, for themselves, for the purely physical or material things in life.

To follow the great commandment, to love God with all your heart and your fellow human being, without distinction, as you love yourself, that is, as an extension of yourself, is to live life on earth at the deepest and most fully human level, a level that Jesus calls eternal life. Those who live this life are called ‘children of God.’ As we share this eucharist we feed on Jesus in the way he has given for us that he may form us more and more into his likeness, until we come to share his life completely. This gift of himself comes to us through small and simple tokens of bread and wine which, of course in purely material terms would not sustain us for very long.

But when we consider the spirit in which this gift is given, and the divine Spirit by which it is sanctified, made holy, and set apart for us to consume, it becomes life-sustaining and life-changing. Brothers and sisters, we who take and eat and drink of the Lord in Holy Communion are being touched by divine love; we are being strengthened, encouraged, empowered, and then sent out to share that divine love, a love which can heal this wounded world. To whom

else can we go to receive such a precious gift, the gift of full and eternal life, a life we have been called and commissioned to share generously with others?