

The Celtic Christians read scripture in three ways.

They read them literally. What does it say, what does it mean?

Scholarship has added a great deal to our ability to read the bible; who wrote it, when they wrote it, who did they write it for, what was the context. All of that adds a great deal to our reading and exploring scripture, not least accurate translation but the first and most obvious way to read the bible is literal. What does it say?

The second way of reading scripture is metaphorical. For example, the story about Jesus touching someone with leprosy and them being healed and restored to their community, but we use that as a metaphor to think about those who are ostracised from our community and how we might reach out to them and draw them back into community.

The third way is imaginatively. Ignatius of Loyola was a big fan of this way to read scripture. Imagine you are there, the sights, sounds and smells!! Who are you in this story, how do you feel, what is its impact on you, what is God saying to you personally as you re-live the story with yourself in it.

Now our reading from Proverbs IS a metaphor. Wisdom, who is female (HA HA) has prepared a banquet, the table is ready. Those who lack wisdom are invited, those with no-sense...come and eat!

The literal meaning is clear, anyone can gain wisdom. All are invited. Wisdom can be found and taken in. The metaphor is food and drink which sustain us, satisfies us and in a subsistence economy it seems like the meat and mixed wine is a luxury, but it's freely offered to all.

This luxury of wisdom can be anybody's if you take the invitation to seek it.

I imagined myself entering the courtyard where the banquet tables are laid out. I found I was feeling a bit apprehensive, but nevertheless I sat at the table and began to listen. As I ate and drank, I listened.

I started to think about the people I have learned from and how much I've benefited from their wisdom. At college, in ministry, here among all of you. I realised that I do listen and do take on board the wisdom that is available and I value that. The wisdom of others has been a banquet and it sustains and satisfies and blesses the decisions I take and things I do.

So, if you are facing uncertainty or feel weighed down because there are decisions needed, who can bring wisdom to that? Who can speak into it? Perhaps the best prayer is to recognise you need wisdom and to pray that as you search you find the person to offer advice. Wisdom, Proverbs tells us is freely available.

It's not hard to see why the lectionary boffin put this OT reading with the Gospel of John.

Jesus is speaking metaphorically with bread representing his body.

The literal meaning is really quite hard to take in.

<sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

That does sounds like cannibalism. It gets worse.

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.

When John wrote his Gospel he begins with the magnificent prologue. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

In the prologue John tells us who Jesus is, the Son of God...so as we read the rest of the gospel it's to explore and explain what we already know, Jesus is God's Son the Messiah. John ends with "this book is written that you might believe".

So what is his purpose in re-telling Jesus graphic language, eat my body, drink my blood? Your thoughts on that are as valid as anyone else.

IF John re-told the story of the Last Supper in (say) chapter 17 we could neatly say...the literal meaning of chapter 6 is hard to hear, but makes sense when we read about the last supper, where Jesus breaks bread and says THIS is my body. Where he pours wine and says THIS is my blood.

But of the four gospels, John doesn't tell the story of the last supper.

Read it metaphorically because Jesus is speaking metaphorically. Eat. Drink.

Jesus said I am in the Father and the Father is in me. I am in you, you are in me. John has written this to remind the widely scattered Christian community of Greek speaking Jews that the Communion which they know

about and celebrate is more than just bread and wine, more than just remembering.

When we eat and drink that food sustains us, satisfies us, nourishes us.

We are to live in Jesus and have Jesus live, by His Spirit, in us.

And it's not a distant theoretical knowledge of Jesus or a liturgical routine of communion, eating and drinking is far more visceral for that.

We are to engage with Jesus in a deep real way that satisfies, sustains and nourishes. To quote the Psalms. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Finally our imagination, and we must remember that in the real time line of Jesus he's not celebrated the last supper.

I'm in the crowd. I'm a disciple...not one of the 12, I'm one of the bigger group of followers. I like it when Jesus tackles the Jewish scholars and leaders, he leaves them speechless, he says things that bring life and joy.

But I've no idea what he's talking about. Eat his body? Drink his blood? What? I look at my friend and ask, "what's he talking about?" My friend shrugs and says, "we'll ask him later".

But he doesn't explain and people are looking dubious and people are leaving and many stop following. I'm torn. I don't understand, Jesus doesn't explain, should I stay or should I go? This is uncomfortable.

What is it he said? I am the bread of life. Manna came from heaven, they ate it, they eventually died. Jesus is the bread from heaven, those who eat will never die. He can't actually mean eat his body.

But earlier on before this eating and drinking he said "The work of God is this; to believe in the one he has sent."

That's it! That's the choice on offer. To believe in Him, the bread of life, the sustaining, satisfying, nourishing, bread of life. To believe and trust in him when others are drifting away.

There have been times in my life when I do not know what's going on, I have no answers, and I've reached the limit.

There have been times when I have metaphorically been at a crossroads and you might be there too. Future uncertain, not sure which way to turn, prayers unanswered, in a dark and heavy place. Has it all been my imagination. Is it real.

I chose to trust. To keep following, one foot in front of another. To believe that Jesus is all he says he is. And he has never let me down and I don't believe he ever will.

Today, when I take bread and wine it is more than remembering. As the bread and wine become part of me I shall give thanks that Jesus sustains and nourishes and blesses me. That little wafer and tiny cup of wine will be a banquet.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 18 August 2024