

Sermon Pentecost 12B 2021

Did you ever learn the song, “O you’ll never go to heaven....” As a Girl Guide (in England that is what Girl Scouts are called) we sang verses of it when camping. My older brother must have heard me sing it at home and then loved to sing the verse, “O you’ll never go to heaven with a fat Girl Guide, ‘cos a fat Girl Guide, is far too wide!” As a young teenager I was overweight, and he made sure I knew it. But I don’t think any of the Girl Guides were really thinking about going to heaven, or having eternal life, at least not in the immediate future. But, as you heard in the Gospel today, Jesus was talking about it and his listeners would have said he spoke a lot about eternal life which they may have thought meant talking about “Going to heaven.” Jesus presented eternal life as something they should want; they should want to live eternally. But was that in fact what they wanted?

The Greek culture of the time had a different take on eternal life. One of their stories was about the Greek goddess of the dawn who was said to have fallen in love with Tithonus, a prince of Troy. He asked Zeus to make him immortal and Zeus complied but made him an ever-living human, not an ever-living god. He obviously did not think things out; his heart ruled his head. So, he aged, he got to be 40 which was still OK but then 80 which was old for a human, but he did not stop aging and he got to be 180 and got smaller and older and smaller and more and more grotesque...awful.

But of course, Christianity has a very different idea of eternal life. Jesus told his listeners that those who followed him and believed in him and ate and drank of him would live forever and not at all as a withered human. They could claim eternal life in their lives on earth and eternal life in their next lives when they would be with God. He made it sound very attractive but life as you know is never simple and you cannot just say “I’ll have the eternal life option” as though you were ordering a Chinese take-out. Making important, potential life-changing choices need thought, discernment, and regular evaluation.

I think it will be helpful to think in some depth about the other messages in the scriptures we heard read today. The first two readings spoke of the need and use of wisdom. It is almost always good to pause and think about what you are going to do, what the possible outcomes are, what you believe about a situation, whom you trust in it, for a start. Using your God-given wisdom makes good sense. God gave it to you to use, to benefit you and everyone affected by any decision you make.

You heard how Solomon asked for wisdom so he could be a good king. Sadly, although he said the right things to God and as you heard, they sounded very impressive, his reign was not full of wisdom. He abused his people by making them do forced labor for his building programs. He married many foreign women as political expediency but built places of worship for them to worship their own deities. He abused his position. You could say it is an early example of how power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. He abandoned the wisdom he was granted as his reign continued. I am sure you know that applying wisdom does make sense, trying to work out the best plan, and of course it is good to turn to God in prayer for guidance as

you think out the options. This means turning to God first and not as a last resort! St. Paul stated it well in his letter to the Ephesian.

¹⁵ ^[b] Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord.

What great advice! St. Paul had traveled through several areas of the Roman Empire and knew how hard it was to live a life faithful to Jesus Christ. The Romans were in control and were not known for empathy towards Christians, just the opposite. Paul is telling his church people to be aware of what is happening in their local communities and make good decisions. If he was writing today, he probably would be telling you to make sure you get vaccinated, wear a mask when you are with other who are not in your bubble, stay socially distant from them, and pass such advice on and encourage others to follow it. I am sure he would also tell you to repent of your role in the horrific way humans have been damaging our planet through global warming, and then make decisions to live in a new way which will help reverse this.

Back to St Paul, he knew that persecution of Christians had taken place in the Roman Empire and could again so wanted them to be wise in their actions. But he also taught as Jesus did that whether they were in their earthly lives, meaning being alive as you think of it, or in their new lives with Christ, life after death, you might say, they were with God, loved by God and that would continue for eternity.

Returning then to eternal life which is what Jesus talked about as you heard in the Gospel today. Those who ate of his flesh and drank of his blood would have eternal life. You should note Jesus did not say they would have it when they were dead but have it then and there. You might imagine that his listeners would have been horrified at the idea of eating flesh. But Jews were used to eating sacrificial meat. It was common practice. Going right back to Moses time the Israelites were taught to offer sacrifices to God. Depending on the reason for the sacrifice some of the sacrificial meat could be eaten, and the best parts were always given to the priests (or did they just help themselves!!!) Eating sacrificial meat was a regular happening and not an abhorrent action, as you might think it to be. Jesus as we heard invited them to share in the sacrifice he was offering, that of his life. This spiritual food they were to eat was to sustain them, to give them the sustenance they could depend on forever.

In this Gospel, St John's Gospel, there is no description of the Last Supper when Jesus told his disciples the significance of his body and blood. Those words which you probably associate with the Last Supper are here. This is the teaching of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus here and at the Last Supper was telling his friends that sharing him, feeding their souls on him, from him, from his humanity was the way to really live. God was with them in the form of the earthly Jesus; in this way God was offering God's self to them to consume. Failing to do that would be like having a wonderful book on your shelf that you left there, unopened, and unread. As long as it stays shelved and unopened it is not doing you any good. But when you take it down and start to read it and become absorbed in it, there is the possibility it will offer much to change your life. So, it is for your life in Christ. He offers you himself which is the offer of eternal life. You have

to decide to accept, again giving you the option of using the wisdom to make decisions God gave you. I intentionally said the offer of eternal life because that is an option for you. In a few minutes we will say the Confession together and following it I will offer the Absolution.

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. *Amen.*

You note the last words are “Keep you in Eternal Life” The Absolution assumes you are in this eternal life but know you have sinned and are requesting God’s forgiveness so that you can stay in Eternal Life.

Just reflect; knowing God is saying to you that you can be with God now and forever. God is never going to abandon you whatever happens. You can make the choice to be with God, in God’s loving care now and forever. What a wonderful promise; what a wonderful God we have. I suggest that today you thank God for giving you eternal life and for telling you that God will be with you today and forever. Thank you, God. Amen

15 ^[h] Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, **16** making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil. **17** Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord.