

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
16 August, 2009
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. — St. John vi: 57

Do you remember the ancient myth of Persephone, the daughter of Demeter and Zeus, who was taken, with Zeus's consent, by the God Hades into the underworld? The story tells us that a frantic and distraught Demeter spent nine days roaming the earth with a lighted torch in search of her cherished daughter. Finally she asked Phoebus – the sun – if he knew of Persephone's fate. Being the sun, he had seen what had happened and was able to tell Demeter where her child was. Plunged into wrath and grief, the goddess roamed the world over in the guise of an old crone. Wherever she was welcomed with hospitality, she taught the citizens of that place the ways of agriculture. Chief of these cities was Eleusis, where in the ages to come her great cult was established.

As a result of Persephone's abduction, the world was plunged into famine. Zeus, realizing this could mean an end to sacrifices, pleaded with Demeter to release the earth from barrenness. But this she would not do, and only when he succeeded in securing Persephone's was fecundity restored to the world. Alas, while in the underworld, Persephone had eaten a pomegranate, which meant that she would have to spend one third of the year with Hades. (Don't ask me why.) Thus did the winter and spring and the fertile and fallow lands come about. At least, that's what the Greeks thought.

The cult of Demeter at Eleusis, which we now call the Eleusinian Mysteries, is the best-known of the so-called mystery religions. By about 300 BC there were many of these mystery religions in Greece; they were celebrations of the continual cycle of life and

death and re-birth. Those who participated in the cults thought of themselves as partakers of a great cosmic secret – they were analogous to the Gnostics of the early Christian age, which is to say, they were a small group of people who claimed for themselves a secret, arcane knowledge – and they believed that they participated in the immortality of the Gods. The mystery religions were essentially religions of redemption, offering to those initiated into them release from the tragedies and limitations of human existence. Release from the vicissitudes of life was obtained through a process of initiation whereby, after long and arduous purifications, the initiate was taken up into the life of the god, obtaining immortality. The ancients did not, by and large, believe in immortality, and when you died, you were dead. True: some very pure and noble folk were taken by the gods to the Elysian Fields where they lived for ever, but most – even the best – lived out their days and died, and that was it.

It was because this belief, a belief where, by and large, neither was virtue rewarded nor wickedness punished in an afterlife, that the ancient Greeks began to search for a religion which would offer some sort of eternal meaning to earthly actions. Thus the mystery cults were a dramatic departure from the traditional theology of the ancient world. And it was not just in these Mystery Cults that the Greeks began to search for meaning. Plato also sought to offer another explanation of the ways of the world. His philosophy is too complex for me to go into any depth here, and you will have to trust me when I tell you that one of his great contributions to Western thought is the notion of the soul. Plato taught that the soul was both pre-existent and immortal, but in this life it was imprisoned or entombed in the body. Plato was called by early theologians “A Christian before Christ” or “Moses speaking Attic Greek” because so much of this philosophy seems to foretell and complement basic theological thought.

But Christianity, especially the Christianity we find in the pages of the New Testament, manifestly *does not* talk of some sort of immortal soul which existed before the physical body's incarnation. And when in the Apostles' Creed we speak of the Resurrection of the Body, we are speaking about the risen life Christians partake of with Christ: it is by the body that Christians are recognizable as individuals with their own personal identity. Hence 'resurrection of the body' means resurrection after death to a fully personal life with Christ in God. This is what St. Paul meant when he taught that we shall be raised with a 'spiritual body' and that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom. We shall be raised in our personal individuality, recognizable as those who before their death were already 'risen with Christ'.

I hear you all thinking: "But don't we believe and teach that when a person dies he goes straight up to heaven to be with God?" Well...I'm afraid that we may be taught or told this or similar things, especially when we try to make sense of the mystery of death, but it isn't very good theology.

So what of these words of Jesus, the words which I took as the text of my sermon? At first blush, Jesus seems to be offering us his own version of a Mystery Cult – his own offer to us of how to achieve immortality. And indeed, we can hardly escape the notion that if we do something obscure and bizarre – eat flesh and drink blood – we will be immortal. But Jesus doesn't say that. Rather he says that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood we are not alive. "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." To reduce Christianity to nothing more than a Mystery Cult, and the Eucharist to nothing more than this cult's ritual, would be to get it staggeringly wrong: our faith in Jesus and our partaking of the Eucharist does not give us immortality; it gives us life.

The drinking of the cup of Jesus means that we have life because we now share in his life, which is the only life of consequence there is. It is a life of resurrection, not a life of immortality. If we were immortal, we would simply never die, but would go on forever like the blessed ancients in their Elysian Fields. But we have partaken of the body and blood of Christ and that means that even though we die, we shall live. All of the ancient theories of life after death tried to take away the sting of death; they tried to offer some hope that somehow humans could escape the revolting finality of death. Yet all of these philosophies and religions were nothing more than wishful thinking. Either the world was, as Plato said, a world of shadows which was entirely unreal, or it was something which we could hope to bypass by tapping into the correct deity who would bless us with never-ending life.

But it is not so with Christianity. The real Mystery – the mystery of God’s redemptive and awesome mercy – is that the way we find life – the only life that matters, which is life with God – is by and through our participation in Christ’s own life, and by sharing his sorrows. This is why Jesus says that only those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have life, which is this life with God.

But it is not immortal life. It is new life altogether. And so the only mystery left is this, the greatest of mysteries: that though humans die – the gospel of Christ affirms this quite clearly – and though we don’t simply slip out of this worn old suit we call the body and fly off free as a bird, we will be resurrected by God to share with him in his eternal life, the life of which we even now partake and have a foretaste of in the Eucharist. The Kingdom of God and life in that Kingdom which is promised us is not just in the future, over there, but is coming and is even right here and now in our midst.