

A text without a context is a pretext!

This was a maxim that was repeated several times during my training as an occasional preacher, and it is particularly apt when looking at today's readings. All three passages could stand on their own, but they make much more sense when seen against the backdrop of the surrounding verses.

Let's start with the passage from Proverbs. It refers to Wisdom having built her house with seven pillars – and yes, that is where T E Lawrence's book title comes from (although originally it was planned as a scholarly survey of seven great cities in the Middle East). What we don't get to read is the chapter before this one, in which Wisdom is extolled with all her virtues and the reader is urged to follow her. By contrast, a description of Folly (and I don't mean the Vicar of St Mary Oatlands) occurs a few verses later and we read that although Folly speaks with a loud voice inviting people into her house, it is where Sheol (or Hades) begins.

The reading from Ephesians is part of a long dissertation on appropriate behaviour for Christians. In the previous verses there are a lot of 'don'ts' – so much so that one might wonder exactly how Ephesian society conducted itself. Sadly it's all too familiar in today's social landscape, with the underlying message that you can't just please yourself if you are claiming to please Jesus at the same time. I'm quite glad that the passage we heard stops short of the next bit, which is the well-known command to wives to obey their husbands.

And then we get to the Gospel reading.

I have a pair of friends called Debbie and Adrian. Debbie has a church background, Adrian does not. Many years ago Debbie took Adrian to church with her, and during the service the priest announced that they would be eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the eternal sacrifice – which of course Debbie understood. However, she gradually became aware that Adrian was sinking lower and lower in his seat and he was covering his eyes with his hands, peeping out between his fingers. When she asked him what the problem was, she discovered that he had genuinely thought there would be a real sacrifice of a lamb or some such, and he was truly frightened.

We might laugh at this story, but if you take today's gospel reading out of context it is easy to see where that idea might come from. Indeed, those who would detract from Christianity, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, have made the accusation of cannibalism, and it's not always easy to come out with the right answer when faced with this kind of question. So why did Jesus use such graphic symbolism in his teaching? We read in the verses surrounding this extract that the Jews took great offence at his words, and indeed a number of his followers left him at this point.

Of course he was dealing with non-intellectual followers who would not necessarily have understood if he told them that they must absorb every aspect of his being in order to be truly part of his kingdom. But this is what I think he meant. When we eat or drink, our bodies absorb the nutrients so that they become part of us; they help us to live and grow. We need to do the same with Jesus's teaching, and the regular partaking of the Eucharist reminds us of this.

The doctrine of transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine actually become the flesh and blood of Jesus – was not formalised until the 11th century. Before that there seems to have been a general belief that the bread and wine was transformed at the point of blessing, and St Ignatius of Antioch went as far as to condemn as heretics those who *confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again.*"

In the 11th century, [Berengar of Tours](#) denied that any material change in the elements was needed to explain the Eucharistic Presence, thereby provoking a considerable stir. Berengar's position was never diametrically opposed to that of his critics, and he was probably never excommunicated, but the controversies that he aroused forced people to clarify the doctrine of the Eucharist. It remains one of the greatest differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants. John Wycliffe was among those who challenged the belief in the 14th century, and the debate continues to this day.

Personally I do not believe that there is a physical change in the bread and wine at communion. However, I do believe that something miraculous takes place – that the bread and wine are imbued with the presence of Jesus - and I almost always feel ‘healed’ and ‘completed’ when I receive the elements.

Another possible image that we might use is that of congruent triangles – anyone remember learning about them at school? Two triangles – or any other shape, for that matter – cannot be congruent unless they completely overlap.

Similarly we as Christians need to 'overlap' Jesus's life – we need to fit ourselves into his shape, which means learning to follow all his teaching and be in alignment with him, continually praying to the Father. Receiving the Eucharist helps us to do this – although of course that is only part of the whole calling to follow Jesus.

When reading around the passages set for today, I was reminded again that there is no short-cut to inclusion in the kingdom. Partaking of the Eucharist is important of course, but we need to continually apply wisdom to our daily conduct and show an example of right living to those around us. Those who argue that some sins are worse than others are, I think, missing the point – all sin comes between us and the Lord, and only by continually practising true Christian behaviour can we come closer to Jesus. Among other things, that means not dwelling on the sins of others or excluding people because they don't fit with our way of doing things. Ultimately it is God who decides who is part of his kingdom, not us, and I believe that part of our job as Christians is to encourage people by the example of our lives and love of Jesus – which includes receiving the spiritual flesh and blood, acting with wisdom in our dealings and behaving in a way that honours Christ.