

**The 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**  
*St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023*

*Jeremiah 15:15-21*

*Romans 12:9-21*

*Matthew 16:21-28*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

There are a number of things about my early ministry that I regret. I guess when I first emerged from my ordination service, brand-new collar gleaming and in my mind almost still able to feel the pressure of Bishop Michael's hand on my head, I was a bit overeager. One of the things I got a bit obsessed was trying to train people to use the word 'baptism' rather than 'christening'. So you know, when they 'phoned up and said, 'we'd like to arrange for little Johnny to be Christened', I would say a slightly pious superior way, 'ah, you mean you'd like him to be baptised...' Partly I regret that behaviour simply for its arrogance, partly because I later discovered that Thomas Cranmer uses the word Christening in the prayer book, but mostly because actually the word christening is a beautiful description of what happens to a person when they receive the waters of baptism. We are 'en-Christened'. We become participants with, sharers in, Jesus Christ. And one of the reasons why I really love the word Christening now is because it is much more clear than the word baptism that what we are doing is becoming participants in a relationship with a person: Jesus Christ.

This is really part two of the sermon that the Rector preached last week, when he challenged us about whether we are perhaps a little bit reticent, maybe even a little bit embarrassed, about the

word 'Jesus'. How willing are we, how ready are we, to recognise that above all else, and actually regardless of everything else, our identity is found in the person and nature of Jesus of Nazareth, mysteriously and wonderfully also the second Person of the divine Trinity. Now if we *were* reticent about using the word Jesus, Kelvin and John have really given us no place to escape this week with the hymns that have been chosen. We began with William Sparrow-Simpsons wonderful hymn, 'All for Jesus', and we will end with Caroline Noel's stonker, 'At the name of Jesus'. Our identity as Christian people is utterly and entirely that we are Jesus' people.

In our first reading this morning we heard part of Jeremiah's prophecy. These words are prophecy to people who are just hanging on to their independence, in the years before the last remnant of the nation of the Children of Israel, formed after the Exodus, collapses. And so as we might expect they are words both of warning and of promise. And I'm struck particularly by the verse: 'your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.' And over and over again in the Old Testament we get this motif of eating, consuming, as an image of the relationship of the people to God. Jeremiah says, 'I found your words, and I ate them, and they brought joy and delight'. We take in the word of God, and it transforms us. Just as food and drink are absorbed by the body and bring us energy and vigour, so the things of God begin to transform our soul.

And the extraordinary claim of Christianity, the scandalous claim in many ways, is that through the grace of God and the events on the old rugged Cross on a hill far away two thousand years ago, that relationship of encountering the word of God and receiving it and finding nourishment thereby is still as true as it always was, but that now the relationship is not with only a

written or spoken word, with a small 'W' if you like, but with the Word of God, the Word that became flesh at Christmas, the Word who is the person and nature of Jesus Christ. There is a man standing at the heart of our faith, not a book, or a set of precepts, or a manifesto. There is the man, Jesus Christ. And it is at his name that every knee shall bow.

St Augustine, whose feast day fell last week, famously preached on Easter Day: 'if we receive the Eucharist worthily, we become what we receive.' If we receive the Eucharist worthily, we become what we receive. Scripture and tradition tell us that when we hold out our hands at the altar, pressed into them is the body of Christ. Now quite what that means is a mystery, and there's a huge amount of variation in our understanding of exactly what might be happening on the altar, particularly in as elastic a denomination as our own, but what we do know is that we receive the body of Christ. At that meal on Maundy Thursday, and on the green hill far away without a city wall Jesus didn't give his disciples some improving words to give them hope, or a cheat code for life. He gave them himself. And he continues to feed his people, here in Salisbury as all across the world, with himself. The Western tradition talks about receiving the whole of Christ, body, blood, soul and divinity, when we stretch out our hands in thanksgiving and penitence and hope... And we are united with Jesus. We are a Christened.

And if we are Christened, then we ought to begin to become more like Christ. Just like the words of Jeremiah, where God's words are eaten and begin to foster within the recipient joy and delight, so as we encounter Jesus day by day, week by week at the altar, in the Scripture, in our prayers, and in our brothers and sisters, so we too become full of the joy and delight of his presence. As we will sing in our final hymn, 'in your hearts

enthroned him', and that enthronement should begin to subdue all that is not holy, all that is not true.

And in the letter to the Romans we get a sort of job description of what that might look like. Some Christians wear that little bracelet, don't they, 'WWJD?' What would Jesus do?: 'Bless those who persecute you, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony, associate with the lowly, take thought for what is noble...' And all the rest. Perhaps particularly the last line of that second reading: 'do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

Which is precisely what happened on Calvary. When the world threw its worst at Jesus, and everything looked like he had been utterly overcome, to the point of being humiliated, convicted, dead and buried... well then in the darkness evil was overcoming good, and transforming despair to hope and light and life.

Just so is Jesus Christ working in your heart and in mine, as we become what we receive. Our calloused and suspicious lives are faithfully and lovingly transformed and overcome. Because they are being transformed and overcome not by a theory or a strategy but by the One who takes up his Cross and staggers into the darkness to be broken and poured out for the healing of a world that doesn't even know it needs it.

And it's illogical and countercultural, and Rocky Peter from last week doesn't understand it either and can't comprehend how crucifixion can look like victory, and it takes him a very long time to work it out. But mercifully none of this is contingent on us understanding it or working it out. Because this is the mysterious operation of grace.

So draw near with faith to the altar this morning, bearing your own smaller but no less real crosses, and simply reach out your hand, make it 'all for Jesus', 'in your hearts enthrone him', know yourself to be Christened, and become what you receive.

Amen.