

Afghanistan, eat my flesh and drink my blood – A Homily for Trinity XII

Joshua 24.1–2a,14–18

Ephesians 6.10–20

John 6.56–69

Last Sunday, to global outrage, Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, came under Taliban control. This marked the culmination of the Taliban's breakneck conquest of most of the country following the withdrawal of US and NATO troops. On Monday, the world was confronted with horrific scenes from Kabul airport as thousands of Afghans desperately tried to board planes to escape.

Last Wednesday, the British parliament was recalled to discuss the crisis. Many MPs on both sides of the floor eviscerated the government's handling of the situation. MPs spoke with conviction about our country's betrayal of Afghanistan and its people, our betrayal of our claims to be a global power committed to the rule of law and human rights, our betrayal all those people from our own country who have sacrificed much in carrying the fragile flame of hope and peace in Afghanistan, whether they were serving in the armed forces or as diplomats, journalists, medics, teachers, international aid workers.

The world is now watching, hoping against hope, that the murderous legacy of the Taliban will not reawaken against anyone it deems to fall foul of its abhorrent interpretation of Islam – those who collaborated with the West, the already heavily persecuted Christian minority, women and girls who seek to live free from oppression and educate themselves to the fullest of their potential.

In moments like these, all the distance between peoples vanishes. The full moral implications of living in a world as interconnected as ours are laid before us. We are all companions to each other, especially in times of humanitarian crisis. As the MP and war veteran Tom Tugendhat said on Wednesday in Parliament, ‘Afghanistan is not a far country about which we know little.’ And as the Archbishop of Canterbury said in the House of Lords, we owe the people of Afghanistan ‘an absolute, lavishly generous moral covenant.’ These are calls not to abandon our companions.

This seems clear to many here in faraway Brighton and Hove. One person I visited last week, who has no personal connection to Afghanistan, was almost at the point of tears. This is what they said. How could we abandon the people of Afghanistan? But what can I do? I pray, but does God listen? This deeply faithful person could barely hold back their anger when they asked me why God

wasn't acting to stop it all. Didn't this show that God doesn't exist? Why has God abandoned all the little girls? I left with these words thumping in my chest. And they are thumping today as we gather to encounter God in word and sacrament.

And I have to say that some of God's word today feels unbearable. In our first reading, we heard Joshua gathering all the tribes of Israel whose ancestors had served other gods to deliver an ultimatum: choose this day whom you will serve. Later in the passage we learned that the people of Israel chose to follow Joshua and serve the Lord. We are told that they remembered it was the Lord their God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. It is hard to hear these words and not suspect underlying coercion when we think of the Taliban sweeping across Afghanistan. And though we know that the God of Israel, who is the God of Jesus Christ, is the source of all peace and has nothing to do with violence, the record of scripture stands as a terrible warning that religion can be co-opted towards horrific ends.

In the Gospel today, however, everything is turned around with Jesus' startling words. He says, 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.' Many of the first disciples found this too much to bear. Their outrage has echoed throughout the ages as people have found what Christians say about the

bread and the wine at the Eucharist too difficult. Having said this, I cannot help but feel how the disciples' outrage at Jesus echoes our outrage about Afghanistan. In different ways they express the perception of a fundamental breach in how things should be. In the case of Afghanistan, this outrage concerns the failure to be faithful to those to whom companionship is owed.

But what has this to do with the outrage that the Eucharist provokes? Well, both types of outrage pivot around how radically close God comes to us in Christ. In Jesus, God shows himself to be humanity's closest companion. How fitting that companion means literally with bread or bread fellows. By identifying the bread and wine of the Eucharist as his body and blood, and telling his disciples to eat and drink, Jesus is indicating just how close this companionship between humanity and God needs to be. In this lies a profound challenge. For Jesus is inviting us to share in the suffering of his own flesh and blood, to share in the victory of his compassionate love. And it is precisely this level of companionship we have not shown to the people of Afghanistan. With the eyes of faith, our outrage at how close God wants to be to us in the Eucharist transforms into a righteous outrage at how often we fail to share this divine closeness with others.

But here we must take care. We are never far away from being like the first disciples. Our righteous outrage can suddenly become our own outrage that too much is demanded of us. In the context of Afghanistan, this translates into the question of how many Afghan refugees we should allow into the UK. It is indeed a difficult thing to eat this flesh and drink this blood, to share bread with those whom we have betrayed and who cry for our help.

And yet the nature of Jesus companionship with us is that even our failures cannot prevent God making us his bread fellows. At every celebration of the Eucharist, in its rhythm of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and communion, we live out the exchange between Jesus and Peter at the end of today's Gospel. Jesus asks us 'Do you also wish to go away?' Or, in different words, are you too going to abandon me, reject my offer of companionship? Are you too going to abandon those whom I came to save, the vulnerable, the outcast, the refugee? And, exhausted by our outrage, whether righteous or unrighteous, we reply, like Peter, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.' At no point do we actually say these words. Rather we embody them in our participation in worship, in our being here together now our hearts thumping as we receive communion, as

we abide in Christ and he abides in us, as he places into our hands his offer of companionship, and charges us to share it with others.

One of the most well known witnesses to what this companionship looks like when confronted by the Taliban is Malala, a Pakistani Muslim woman who as a girl survived being shot in the head by the Taliban when she refused to stop going to school. In a speech she gave to the UN, a few years before she won the Nobel Peace prize in 2014, this is what she said: 'the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends too. They thought that the bullets would silence us. But they failed. And then, out of that silence came, thousands of voices. The terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions but nothing changed in my life except this: Weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage were born. So here I stand... one girl among many. I speak – not for myself, but for all girls and boys. I raise up my voice – not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard.'

Whatever our outrage and however helpless we may feel, as those who eat Christ's body and drink his blood, let us stand alongside Malala, the people of Afghanistan, and all the world's dispossessed, ready to share the bread of companionship with

anyone who needs it, for this is how God helps, this is where God exists, this truly is the word of eternal life.