

Twenty First Sunday of the Year

Mthr Esther Brazil

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

A few months ago, I came across a book called “Cultish” by the linguist Amanda Montell. It looks at the ways in which language can be used as a tool to draw us in and give us a sense of belonging in order to control us. This happens in many contexts: in exercise groups like CrossFit and Peloton, even ParkRun; in political parties and dieting culture and advertising; and in brainwashing tragedies like the Jonestown massacre.

You might be thinking that the Church of England has its own buzzwords and slogans and advertising campaigns, and you are right. But language is, in abstract, something neutral. And whether used for good, for evil, or something in between, it has a great power to build community, because it can make people feel that they belong.

As a lifelong nomad, the problem of belonging is very close to my heart. Where and how do we find identity? Today’s readings touch on this, with different sets of people realising, and admitting, an identity in God.

“We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God”, the Israelites tell Joshua, in a moment where they find themselves turning back to God, because they remember that he has not only delivered them from slavery in Egypt in the past, but more recently has been defeating the very people whose gods they had decided to worship. They have remembered that in some fundamental sense, they belong to their God, and to no other. “Far be it from us,” they say, “that we should forsake the Lord to serve other Gods.”

In John, some of Jesus’ followers leave after hearing Jesus claim that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will abide in him, and he in them; and that they will

therefore live forever, since *this* food is the bread that came down from heaven, better even than the manna that saved their ancestors.

“This is a hard saying,” they cry; “who can listen to it?” Jesus responds, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life,” and he asks the remaining disciples if they, too, wish to leave. “Lord, to whom shall we go?” says Peter. “You have the words of eternal life.”

The words of eternal life have come out of the mouth of a prophet, a leader, who has persuasive language, who talks about life and death and practices that must have seemed alarming to those who listened. But he is not running a cult. He does not trick or cajole. He *is* a famously effective wordsmith, speaking in parables and riddles, but he also sometimes says things so simple and direct that he either confounds or offends.

Unlike in a classic cult, or at a contemporary gym, there are no threats of punishment if someone wishes to cancel their membership. “After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him”, John writes. Jesus doesn’t try to stop them. For the leader of a movement that would later become globally successful, Jesus seems entirely unconcerned about numbers.

I wonder what “hard saying” would make each of us leave the church? “I am the bread of life” is not so hard for us -- we are comfortably Christocentric here in the 21st century -- but maybe something else. It’s worth taking a moment to think about where your limits are; and, when things grow difficult for whatever reason, what makes you stay.

I think I would be suspicious if things were too easy too much of the time. Our faith holds us to higher standards not because we are called to lose ourselves, but because God loves us and wants us to flourish, not just in the pleasure of the moment, but long-term.

We teach delayed gratification and self-control to children: we know that sugar is a drug that stops us wanting wholesome food and keeps us awake past our bedtimes, and so we regulate children’s consumption of it (and our own during Lent, maybe); not

because we are controlling, or want to deny their inherent personhood, but because we want them to flourish, to grow and rest and be healthy. And we want these things for them not because they have earned our care, but because we love them.

God loves us not because of our commitment, or our intelligence or talents, or even our piety, but because we are individuals made in his image, known and loved as ourselves. To love God in return is to embrace one who desires our flourishing, who desires us to become fully ourselves, and to exist in a loving relationship with him.

The Israelites commit the equivalent of sweets and too many ipad games before bedtime, worshipping other, shinier gods of whatever the local place is, but they return again and again to this God for whom justice, loyalty, and mercy are so central. Their identity is forged in their connection to the promised land, and in loyalty to a God who is faithful to them throughout the countless generations whose stories they told and retold and which became the Hebrew scriptures. They return because they know that they belong to God, who speaks to them in words, through the prophets.

What binds our identity to God? We are largely tied, as the disciples were, by language. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" asks Peter. "You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter stays, and we stay, with Christ, because we know that he is the Holy One of God. We are drawn in by language that conveys simple truth.

It is not rhetoric that draws the disciples in, and it is not rhetoric that has formed and nourished the church for two thousand years. We have, over time, surrounded this simple truth with many layers of beauty to celebrate its holiness; in the form of the mass; in the music we use to enhance our worship; in the colours and smells and textures, in everything that delights the senses and honours God. I know that I was drawn in because of incense and polyphony as a teenager. But I stayed because of the Word, the Logos who made himself present in the sacrifice of the altar. I stayed because of a simple truth conveyed in simple language. My belonging within this church was cemented through a devastatingly simple message of love.

The Church uses a language of belonging to establish our identity as Christians, to welcome us, to locate us in its seasons and rhythms, its festivities and its sacred rites. But the language used by the church is not the language of a cult, that strips us of our identity or subsumes our better judgement for its own purposes. The language of the church in scripture, scholarship, and tradition invites us to participate in Christ's body, the church. It reenacts his sacrifice in the mass. And it invites us to flourish by becoming more truly ourselves in imitation and closeness with Christ, bringing our own clear voices and minds into the conversation and discernment of the church's collective life.

Language is the material that makes up the scaffolding of group affiliation, but it is more than that -- it is, Montell writes, "the material that fabricates our reality". We overlook it at our peril.

So this week, let us pay close attention to the words that we use to include and exclude others; the words we use when we speak to God; and the beauty of the language that beckons us in, that opens the door to belonging in Christ's own church, that calls us to respond by loving God and each other.

Amen.