

John 6:51-58

The altar was draped, as always, in starched linen and set with silver chalices and patten. The congregation was silent, even somber, as the priest began carefully to read the words of institution in a solemn tone meant to add dignity to the proceedings. And “On [this] occasion,” writes, Martin Copenhaver “when I repeated Jesus’ familiar words, ‘This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you’ a small girl suddenly said in a loud voice, ‘Ew, yuk!’ The congregation looked horrified,” he continues, “as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar — which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation.”¹

She called it, like the child in ‘the emperor’s New Clothes’. This is big stuff that we’re doing here. How do we make sense of it all?

In today’s gospel, we are stuck in the middle of an argument between Jesus and the crowd who was following him about bread from heaven and Jesus’ nearly unintelligible and rather grotesque assertions about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Behind these verses a controversy rages in the early Church about the nature and import of the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, Eucharist, a controversy which John the evangelist is attempting to settle with his record of Jesus’ discourse about giving his own flesh and blood that the world might live.

Eating flesh was forbidden. It was associated with vultures (Ez 39:17) and evildoers (Zech 11:9). Drinking blood was equally offensive. “You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood,” said Genesis (9:4). “You shall not eat...any blood,” said Leviticus (3:17). “You shall not eat flesh and drink blood,” said Ezekiel (39:17).²

Thus, the crowd listening to Jesus would hear his words, “eat my flesh and drink my blood,” as blasphemy, as an abomination, as a violation of a core belief about the Holy, and our proper relationship with the Holy. These words of Jesus are akin to the words of the snake in the Garden tempting his listeners to eat a forbidden fruit; to violate a God-given commandment; to violate the sacred ordering of creation.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/>

² <https://onemansweb.org/this-terrible-eating-of-bread-john-6-51-58.html>

Consider what they said: "*Life is from God alone and belongs to God alone. To ingest fat or blood is to strive to be like God*"!!! What happens when we eat this flesh and drink this blood? John has Jesus saying "... the one who eats this bread will live for ever." This is surely to be God-like. Life forever and/or eternal life is repeated three times in these six verses!

We are being called to be God-like, to let go of something of the humanity in us which leads to death.

The scandal of these words from Jesus is so great that at the end of this chapter it seems only the twelve disciples remain with Jesus.

(6:66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' 68Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' 70Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.'

Where is the devil? "Not in Judas," those disciples who turned back might cry, "but in Jesus!" because ... in the Aramaic tradition ... "the eater of flesh" is the title of the devil... The drinking of blood was looked on as an horrendous thing forbidden by God's law... Its transferred, symbolical meaning was that of brutal slaughter (Jer. 46:10)" says Raymond Brown.³⁾

So what's it got to do with us?

What does this talk of flesh and blood and heavenly bread and even with the Lord's Supper really have to do with the ins and outs, the ups and downs, of everyday living? Even with the Installation Service yesterday with all its pomp and ceremony? What does it have to do with the things that really matter, our hopes and fears, loves and hates, our living and our dying? What does it have to do with us, here and now, two thousand years later, struggling just to make ends meet?"

I come to the Biblical text for meaning, not meaning in the sense of answering all my questions, but meaning which makes life worth living. So, what does it all mean?

³The Gospel According to John Vol 1. pp 284 in <https://onemansweb.org/this-terrible-eating-of-bread-john-6-51-58.html>

Jesus responds, “I am telling you the truth,” he says, both to the crowd gathered around him in Capernaum and those gathered today. “I am telling you the truth: if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in yourselves. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.... For my flesh is the real food; my blood is the real drink.”

And then, suddenly, upon hearing these words we realise – the crowd both then and now – we realise that he’s serious. He’s not being metaphorical or speaking abstractly; he really means it. This one, Jesus, would give us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. Upon hearing it the crowd in Capernaum shrinks back because what Jesus is speaking about has always been regarded as an abomination by the law and the prophets. And upon hearing it we shrink back because it doesn’t square with our reason, it doesn’t fit our sensibilities, and, if we’re to be honest, it’s just a little gross, sounding closer to cannibalism than it does Christianity. I mean, think about it for a moment. When is the last time you really paid close attention to the words of Jesus we hear at each celebration of the Eucharist?⁴

For three weeks, now, we have looked at this sixth chapter of *The Gospel According to John* and have connected it to our faith and, particularly, to the sacraments and the way they create and nourish our faith. But now, here, in the fourth week, we finally encounter the heart of it all. In these verses we begin to recognise just what is at stake for Jesus, just how much we are worth to him.

We have read, studied, and struggled to understand what Jesus means by speaking of the bread of life and the food from heaven. Here, now, he makes himself far too plain. In this passage, Jesus gets all too gritty, even base, in his imagery in order to confront us with the claim and promise of the carnal God, the God who becomes incarnate, who takes on flesh, becomes just like us, so that we may one day be like God.

For in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and in the sacraments, the Word given physical, visible form once again, we meet the God who will be satisfied with nothing less than our whole selves. This is why Jesus speaks of giving us his flesh and blood, you see, “flesh and blood” is a Hebrew idiom which refers to the whole person, hearts,

⁴ David Lose

minds, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything. In Jesus, you see, the whole of God meets us to love, redeem, and sustain the whole of who we are, good, bad, and ugly.

The God who comes for our whole selves.

In one sense, this sums up all of John's testimony to Christ. For throughout the Fourth Gospel we have encountered some of the most familiar images describing the relationship of Jesus and those who believe in him: Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep; he is the vine and we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in him. "In this passage, however," as Copenhaver writes, "language is pressed to the limits to express the indissoluble union and inextricable participation of one life in another. For those who receive Jesus, the whole Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. He can no more be taken from the believer's life than last Tuesday's breakfast can be plucked from one's body."⁵

This is the promise which God makes to us in the Sacraments: to be one with us and for us forever, to stick with us and even *in* us no matter what.

Each and every time we celebrate Holy Communion, God comes to us once again to offer us a promise made so concrete and solid so that we can touch and feel, taste and eat it. For, here, again, in these common physical elements, we have God's promise that God not only cares about our births and deaths, our marriages and our jobs, our successes and our failures, but that God has also joined God's own self to them and to us through Christ, the Word made flesh and given for us.

So come.

Come to eat and drink Jesus' promise.

Come prepared to meet the God who meets us exactly where we are.

Come to receive the real food of Christ's own body, the real drink of Christ's own blood, that we might have support in living in this so very real and difficult world.

Come, finally, to meet the God who offers us, not just meaning, but life itself, life in Christ both now and forever.

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/>

Thank you for your work and your words, and blessings on your proclamation of this living Word this week.⁶

Two become one..

This is wisdom.

susanna

⁶ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/>