

Sermon for August 16, 2009: Lessons for the Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Today the Gospel of John serves up ideas that are distinctly difficult to modern people such as ourselves.

The first is strange to our ears, as it was to those who first heard it.

It must of have been strange to hear Jesus say, "I am bread."

That was nothing like the speech that Israel had heard before from Moses or her prophets.

But to say "I am bread" was very little compared to saying that whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever.

Flesh eating and blood drinking are frankly repulsive practices.

They were to the Jews of the first century, whose law forbade cooking meat with blood, who eschewed the human sacrifice that some around them had practiced.

Indeed, Jesus' teaching was troubling enough that many of his disciples said "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

And then we are told that "because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

But the idea troubles modern people as well.

I once went with a baptist friend to a Catholic church, on a field trip for a religion class she was taking.

"I don't want to eat anyone's flesh or drink their blood," she remarked as she left.

Not a religion for her.

There are many ways to understand Jesus' words here and at the Last Supper.

Most of them are open to you in the Episcopal Church.

Some would say that these words are pure metaphor, that they are purely symbolic, that Jesus meant that the bread and wine are mere

symbols of the flesh and blood that he gave up on the Cross for the life of the world.

They help us remember.

Others center in on the words of this promise and seem to take it quite literally, insisting that bread and wine become body and blood.

We must say that that is true, spiritually.

In the Holy Spirit, we receive Christ's body and blood in this sacred meal, and we do so in a spiritual manner.

To say that we eat Christ's body and drink his blood spiritually is not to say that we do not really do so.

I hope we all know that things that are spiritually true are just as true or even more true than things that are true in some more physical sense.

And of course, because Jesus Christ is both God and human, because of the incarnation, to speak of the world though some great cleavage still divides the physical from the spiritual is a lie.

These words of the Word Made Flesh are true, in this sense most of all, that when we celebrate this sacred meal, we find ourselves at Calvary.

Time and space, the distance of 2000 years and thousands of miles, and untold generations are gone when we gather at this table.

We are then there with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Beloved Disciple, looking up at the Savior of the world, reigning from the Cross.

When we gather to break the bread and drink the cup, we are with the women who watched from a distance as the Savior gave up his body and blood and spirit for our sake, to make us whole.

To eat and drink of this bread and this cup is to go to the Cross and receive its benefits; this is your weekly altar call; the weekly renewal of the death you died with Christ in your baptism.

If you are troubled by Jesus' words about eating and drinking, be

thankful.

He meant to trouble you.

He meant to offer you a spiritual and intellectual challenge, meant to invite you into a dynamic relationship week by week and into eternity.

Many of us would also be troubled by his insistence that the sacred eating and drinking of this meal is necessary, that it is indispensable to our salvation.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Those who eat and drink will have eternal life, will be raised up on the last day, will live forever.

He makes the point three times, so it is difficult to miss.

Here we differ from Jesus' first hearers.

Many of them readily accepted the idea that he is the way, the truth, the life.

We'd prefer him to be a way, a truth, a life.

But here we hear that this a meal that cannot be skipped.

In a world of considerable religious diversity, the idea that the Eucharist is necessary for salvation troubles us.

I have told you before that I am sorely tempted to be a universalist, hoping that somehow we all, the whole creation, will share in new creation.

That is the most attractive heresy for democratic, egalitarian, bourgeoisie theologians like me.

I like to take that promise found in the Rite I service, from I John 2:1-2, out of context, to proclaim that "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not four ours only, **but for the sins of the whole world.**"

Maybe it will be so.

But that is not the message before us today. In John 6, we hear that this meal cannot be done without,

that salvation is through Jesus Christ and is extended to us through his Church and his sacraments.

So that means that the church cannot be done without.

We all need to come to the altar, every Sunday, because here eternal life and Resurrection are served to us.

You all do not have a very holy priest, but I can say this, that no vacation Sunday passes for me without some voice inside me reminding me to do all I can to present myself at the nearest altar.

It is God's will, expressed in the words of his Son and in the Word written, that we gather here or wherever each week to celebrate the mysteries of his Body and Blood.

And so as we read in Ephesians, "be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time," for as Jesus Christ said "whoever eats this bread will live forever."