

Spiritual Nourishment And Belief

John 6:53-59
August 20, 2006

I.

Hearing the words of today's Gospel today, two thousand years after they were written, still is an unsettling experience. Remember what it was like when someone scraped their fingernails across the blackboard. That was something like my reaction when I first read this passage many years ago.

If Jesus' words make us uncomfortable now, imagine the reaction at the time by Jews for whom blood was ritually unclean. They were shocking and provocative words. And as the next section of John's Gospel tells us, many of the people who were traveling with Jesus understood him literally, and were no longer able to follow him because of what he said.

What are we to make of Jesus' words? Eat my flesh and drink my blood. That sounds like an advertisement for a grade B horror movie on late night television.

Several weeks ago I talked about a particularly difficult passage from Scripture, and wondered if it was like those cans of frozen orange juice to which you must add three cans of water before you can even drink it.

Is today's Gospel like that? Do we have to water it down before we can begin to understand it? What's going on here? What happened to the love? Where is the Prince of Peace? This isn't the Jesus we learned about when we were in Sunday School, is it?

We want to think of Jesus as a gentle shepherd, who performed healing miracles and proclaimed God's love for us. At first glance these passages just don't seem to fit some of our preconceived notions about Jesus. Was John having a bad day when he wrote this part of his Gospel? Did John just forget about the kinder, gentler, more user-friendly Jesus?

I don't think so. John's Gospel for today is entirely consistent with Jesus' message to humanity. Today's lesson basically sets forth, in uncompromising language, the uncompromising truth of the Gospel. Rather than giving people bad news, Jesus actually was preaching the Good News.

Once again, as we have seen Jesus frequently do, he was speaking figuratively. Here, he used his flesh and blood as metaphors to describe himself and the salvation he knew he was destined to offer humanity through the cross. And he used eating and drinking as metaphors to describe our inward consumption, in belief by faith, of that eternal hope.

II.

That particular understanding of Jesus' metaphors, however, has not been universally accepted by theologians and scholars. They disagree, and there are well-known biblical scholars on every side of the issue. As a result, in trying to understand what today's Gospel means, it is useful to begin by clarifying what it does not mean.

Roman Catholic theologians see today's readings as unequivocally pointing to the Eucharist. They believe that the Eucharistic elements really are Jesus' flesh and blood, and the words of today's Gospel literally describe what happens at the Eucharist. We eat flesh and drink blood.

Many Protestants also see the Eucharist as the focal point of today's gospel. Their thinking is that when we participate in the Eucharist we are recreating Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and in so doing we are appropriating that sacrifice to ourselves in a renewal of life. Today's reading, they claim, supports that idea.

The Episcopal Church, however, does not agree with Roman doctrine. And while I accept the idea that Christ's sacrifice is made present to us in the Eucharist, and it is the way in which we are united to his offering of himself, I do not believe that is what Jesus was preaching in today's Gospel. The issue is not divergent views on what happens at the altar during communion. The question is what did Jesus mean when he said what he said?

So, why is there a difference of opinion? The answer might be found in how these theologians and scholars think John might have been trying to use his Gospel. And here I might offer a slight digression by way of explanation. No extra charge.

Theologians and scholars assert that writers of the four Gospels often emphasized different things because they were writing to different audiences. They say that Matthew's Gospel, for example, has a decidedly Jewish tone because he was writing to the Jews of the time in an effort to bring them to faith in Christ. Luke, on the other hand, appears to scholars and critics to have been writing to a Gentile audience for a similar purpose.

And history tells us that at the time Matthew and Luke wrote, relatively soon after the crucifixion, Christianity still was regarded as a Jewish sect, and the people to whom they wrote still shared much of the religious, cultural, and social heritage that was part of the world in which Jesus lived and died. Christians and Jews were different sides of the same coin.

John's Gospel, however, was the last to be written, and it came at a later time in the first century when Judaism and Christianity were beginning to go their separate ways. As a result, the audience to which John was writing was not necessarily the same audience to which Jesus had been speaking some fifty to sixty years earlier.

Jesus was speaking to what we might call people of Old Testament, and obviously his words were prior to the cross. John, however, was writing to this newly divergent and separate group of Christians who were starting to establish themselves apart from historical Judaism.

As a result, some theologians and scholars say that John wanted to remind these new Christians of one of the most distinctive features of the new faith, which was the Eucharist. What better way to do so, they argue, than to focus on Jesus' words about his flesh and blood.

I understand that argument, and find it about thirty-five percent persuasive. But thirty-five percent is not fifty-one percent, and thus the argument fails. Perhaps you might give it a higher percentage. While I agree that today's reading can point indirectly to the Eucharist, there are several reasons why it is not the message of the reading.

First, the Lord's Supper, on the night before Jesus' death in Jerusalem, had not yet occurred at the time Jesus spoke these words while teaching in Capernaum a year earlier. It does not appear that Jesus was thinking in Eucharistic terms at that earlier time.

Second, there is no reason to think that Jesus even was anticipating the Eucharist or that last night in Jerusalem because in today's Gospel Jesus was preaching to unbelievers, whereas the Eucharist is offered to those who already are Christians.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, participation in the Eucharist, in and of itself, does not produce eternal life, which is what Jesus said was the result of eating and drinking his flesh and blood. Eternal life comes only through repentance and belief that Christ died on the cross for our sins. The Eucharist, of course, re-enacts that sacrifice, but in the absence of belief it does not save. Belief must come first.

III.

Now, let me try to plug this theological digression back into this sermon. There are times when we must resist the temptation to interpret Scripture only, and I repeat, only, in terms of how it applies to our lives today. We can have a tendency to believe that because many of the conditions of the first century no longer exist, we always must search for contemporary meaning utilizing the knowledge and experience we have acquired over two millennia.

That can be true in some cases where the teachings are related to church practices or family life, or where the teachings have political or governmental implications, for example. Jesus' parables also are fertile ground for contemporary application.

But some things do not change. Some things, such as the Gospel and the Good News, are just as true today in exactly the same ways as they were at the time they were first inspired to be written in Scripture.

Today's reading is one of those things that does not change. It is not necessary for us to look for contemporary meaning because the ancient meaning endures. And if the ancient meaning endures from the time of Jesus, it certainly continued to John's day.

If this is true, and I believe it is, then it is neither fruitful nor helpful to claim that John intended a Eucharistic meaning for Jesus' words in order to appeal to the new emerging Christian church when that was not the meaning that Jesus intended.

IV.

Jesus' purpose in the fourth Gospel was to tell people who he is. On seven occasions he did so in strictly metaphorical terms, beginning with the pronouncement "I am." We already have heard "I am the bread of life." We also are familiar with the others. "I am the light of the world," "I am the door," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," and "I am the true vine."

These metaphors all come from John's gospel, perhaps inspired, as I suggested last week, by the years John likely spent with Mary after the crucifixion. And because they are metaphors, they all have real-life meanings

In short, all of these descriptions are intended by Jesus to hold himself out to humanity as the source of life itself and foundation upon which our eternal hope can rest if we accept him in that way.

Against this background, let us look once again at the specifics of today's Gospel. And as we do that, we will see that today's reading merely refers to the same things that Jesus has been speaking of all along in chapter six, albeit in stronger language.

For example, in the reading appointed for two weeks ago, Jesus said in verse 47 of chapter six, "truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life." Today, he said in verses 51 and 58 "truly, truly, he who eats this bread will live for ever." Thus, believing means the same thing as eating this bread. "He who believes," and "he who eats" are one and the same.

Similarly, in verse 40 of chapter six, which also is from the appointed reading for two weeks ago, Jesus said, "all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." Compare that with verse 54 in today's reading where he said, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.

Again, in today's reading Jesus has substituted the metaphor of eating and drinking for the real-life act of belief. In a way, it's simple algebra. If belief means eternal life, and eating

Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood also mean eternal life, then the conclusion must be that the references to flesh and blood are also references to belief.

And now perhaps we can look at how today's Gospel speaks to us in the twenty-first century. We do not come looking for a new and improved contemporary application, for as I said earlier the meaning has not changed. But we do ask ourselves how we have inwardly ingested that meaning, how we have consumed it, so that this bread of heaven, this cup of the covenant, guides our lives.

I knew an old preacher who once said that we all have a God-shaped hole in our hearts. And he pointed out how we tend to fill it up with everything but God. We easily can focus on other good things, such as our families, our jobs, and our communities, but if we let them displace God then we should not wonder why we live life unfulfilled and hungry.

Jesus offers us himself to satisfy that hunger. In today's Gospel he spoke in metaphors, but he calls us in truth and in love to a better life than we could ever imagine.

V.

The time will come when we all will be called to account for the content of our lives. And at that time the important things will not be our piety, or our church attendance, or the parish committees on which we served, although those all are important.

The real test will not be whether we were successful, but whether we were faithful. We will be judged not by what we achieved, but by what we believed. The question will not be did you strike it rich, but did you answer the call.

This in many ways describes the human predicament. We work and try very hard to do good things, but we are not satisfied. We spend money on that which is not real bread, and remain hungry. Jesus called people then, and he calls us now, to consume him in faith and belief. And he promises that if we do so we will thirst and hunger no more in this world, and we will be with him forever in the next. *Amen.*