

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6: 51-58

“The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’”

Good question. Whenever we hear the Jews raising issues we know that there will be a significant change coming in understanding and also we hear echoes of our own questions. Clearly this was not a welcome idea, especially for those for whom blood was not acceptable. For the Jews it was unthinkable to eat flesh and blood. Kosher law demands that meat is bled first. It is also off putting to many who come from outside our faith – consider the Islamic faith, or Buddhists. What do they make of a faith that makes a significant symbol of the eating of the flesh and the blood?

These verses, “So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;’” have become the most controversial verses in the Gospel of John. They have been the cause of major splits in theological understanding since the beginning of the church. So where’s the controversy?

Let’s start with the text itself as we continue to look at the figurative use of the “bread” language. Just a quick recap of what we have been thinking about. The first image of bread was a physical one in the feeding of the five thousand. It symbolized the abundance of God’s spiritual love for us, that we could all feed to satisfaction and there would still be twelve baskets left over. Then the Jews wanted to know how they could get this living bread that would not perish and were told to “believe.” The next image was one of Jesus as the bread of heaven in the form of the Word of God that would guide us into the right ways and now today we have this biblical imperative. “Unless,” said Jesus, “*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*”

This brings us to the heart of the controversy. Let me explain by way of an example. In my sister’s church in England they have shared services in the summer with the neighboring Methodist Chapel to allow the pastors to have vacation. For one month they are Methodists, and for the second they are Anglicans. When my sister’s parish goes to the Methodist Chapel, the bread for communion is regular bread and there is grape juice in little cups. After the service, what’s left of the bread is brought down to the coffee hour and eaten there. My sister says she feels really uncomfortable about it and that’s because there is a theological split here. There is a great deal more importance attached to those little dry wafers and the wine for us. No finishing off leftovers at coffee hour. And that’s because the meaning of these controversial verses is taken more literally in the sacramental churches. That’s us, the Lutherans, the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Church.

Many Christian churches are like the Methodist Church where the sacrament of Holy Eucharist is a symbolic action of remembering – rather like a birthday cake! For many the sacrament is in coming together around the table to share in the action. And let’s not limit that for that is a part of what we all do. We do kneel down together, friend and foe, as the body of

Christ in community. But, for Evangelicals, it is the Word – that is the living bread – and not the sacrament. And that is why you will see no altar in the Evangelical churches, only a pulpit/stage.

But we in the sacramental churches, (that is the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church and we, the Anglican Church); share a belief that by God's grace and our faith that in the consecration of the bread and wine there is a sense of Christ's presence. "Sanctify this bread to be for us the Body and Blood of your son Jesus Christ" we pray at the moment of consecration. And that is rooted in these verses. "*Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*" and "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*"

So for us this is not just blessed bread; something changes in the action of the communion and it becomes for us the body and blood of Christ.

Later, I am going to be doing a simple instructed Eucharist for the children and I thought we could do a little tryout right now. I will show them the corporal, which comes from the Latin word "*corp*" which means body. I will show them how it is ironed so the flaps close over each other to catch up the little fragments so they will not fall out when it is folded. I will show them the pall, which covers the body, and you know what that word is also used for. I will show them the *piscina* in the sacristy, where the drain opens into the ground so we can return the unused wine and water to the Creation, and I will show them where we put the unused wafers in the reserve, the presence of Christ marked by the ambry light. The only time that the light is out is on Good Friday and Holy Saturday when Christ is no longer present in the world. In all this I will stress that we treat the symbolic body of Christ with extreme care and respect.

So what do these controversial verses mean for us right now? We're in a sort of wilderness, St Barnabas, and we need to go through it together. Will we grumble like the ancient Hebrew people? You bet! But we know that we will receive manna from heaven in his gift of Word, "*This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.*" We know that his desire to nurture us in his love feeds everyone who comes and still overflows with twelve baskets over; we know we have been forgiven and saved in his supreme gift of himself in the body and blood, "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;*"

This is Christ's gift and promise to us St. Barnabas, which we each share and eat of as we take this journey. Right now, as we struggle a bit to make sense of a lot of change, not knowing what lies ahead, feeling a bit anxious perhaps, we need to trust and believe. We need to reach out to each other too as we take this journey together as the body of Christ. Because, together, in communion, we will be sustained and held, we will be guided and strengthened. His promise is there, St. Barnabas, Christ is still speaking to us. Listen, "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*" What could be more comforting than that? Christ is abiding in us; Christ will be with us, in my body, in yours, in ours. Individually we can do nothing without the grace of God, but together we can do so much more than we can imagine. +

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