

How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

a sermon preached on the

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Lection: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Psalm 34:15-22, John 6:52-69

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”¹ That is perhaps the most vexing of all questions Christians struggle to answer, even more problematic than the question about how God can be three yet one. Typically, Jesus does not answer their question, instead answering a question they haven't asked: “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Humanity and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”²

This mystery has occupied my mind and long perplexed me. And it is clear, from the turgid, rationalistic and convoluted prayers and rubrics which the Reformers invented, out of a deep fear of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, that it has perplexed the Church too. And in spite of all the efforts to solve the problem rationally, Christian history has grown increasingly divided and conflicted, flesh-hating, body-despising, woman-fearing, sexually neurotic, and earth ravaging – the litany of consequences of our failure to truly eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Humanity is too long and too tragic to bear at times. What I now realise is that I, too, have attempted to solve this as a rational problem. And the effect of all this left-brained rationalising is to sever the Eucharist from its roots, from the ground in which it is nourished, to drive it higher and higher into a latter-day scholastic cloud. And that is where Eucharist, and for that matter the whole of the Christian gospel, has gotten lost – a critical factor in the widespread disillusion with institution-based faith. Like the disciples in Luke's picturesque account of the Ascension, we are gazing upward, into the skies, looking in the wrong place. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”³

Thus I now realise that I too have assumed that Spirit comes down into matter, after the fashion of the metaphor of the annunciation to Mary, to name just one of many such images. And if Spirit comes down, much as a person of high social status might condescend to visit underlings, it was inevitable that I would assume that the goal of religious life is elevation, ascent, an upwards movement, a rising higher and higher. And many scriptural texts seem to support this strictly one-way traffic in religious intercourse between the human and the Divine. Indeed, even John's text paradoxically contains this strange little aside which has probably inspired much Christian flesh-hating: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.”⁴ Likewise, many of the church's prayers, doctrines, rituals, and pious writings lend support to this rocket-ship spiritualising. And the inflating effect of all this is actually devastating, so I have finally recognised. And how I wish that I could undo some of the worst of its consequences in my own life!

In fact, flesh is the vital element! Not up-high-in-the-clouds Spirit, but down on the ground flesh! Now I see that at precisely those moments when I have been ‘spiritual’, up high, flesh has invaded. For this is the necessary compensation for an inflated, one-sided, excessively spiritual religion. When our feet are off the ground it is flesh which will save us from ourselves, flesh which will make us whole and complete. This must be why Jesus says that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood we have no life in us. Israel, we remember, was too full of itself, inflated with its self-perception as the chosen people – just as the Church is rather too full of itself, inflated with its self-perception as the bearer of the totality of truth. And those who looked for a

¹ John 6:52b

² John 6:53

³ Acts 1:11

⁴ John 6:63a

Messiah were in pursuit of an even higher, even more inflated Israel, conquering its Roman enemies, to be established once more as a great world power – just as today the Church looks for a Messiah which will make it, once again, a great world power. But what Jesus offers instead of yet more spirit is, instead, flesh, his own body. Indeed, it is through Jesus' flesh, which scandalously erupts into the first century Palestinian scene, which is the means by which the Jewish nation might be saved from itself.

And that is precisely the gift and the mystery and the scandal of the Eucharistic sacrifice. We are offered salvation from our one-sidedness, by the eruption of flesh. And not merely the flesh of a 2000 year old historical legend, somehow preserved through memorialising and high piety. The communion Jesus undergoes with himself, eating his own flesh and blood at the last supper, as Saint John Chrysostom observed in the fourth century, is the communion which all humans are invited to undergo. Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Humanity, which is all humanity, will indeed have eternal life ⁵ - because one-sided and excessive spirit is made whole through the medium of humbling and grounding flesh. In the Eucharist what each of us must eat is not a 2000 year old memorial – as the Book of Common Prayer tragically enshrines – but that part of our own despised fleshiness which we have excluded and rejected.

What might this look like, in practical terms? Well, the medium by which our flesh erupts, and thus offers salvation, is as varied as we are varied – though among the common manifestations are illness, accident, moral failure, shame, guilt, nightmares, appalling visions, and all manner of unexpected and shocking events and 'coincidences'. That is, salvation comes to us through what we despise, reject, expel, or forbid from consciousness – because beneath such unwelcome and unwanted phenomena is the ground of the deepest truth about ourselves which we need for wholeness, but which feels to ego consciousness like an enemy. Such unwelcome and frequently-disturbing phenomena are actually the 'flesh', the bread of heaven, which we are invited to consume. Of course this bread of heaven seems to us as a shocking, incomprehensible and insurmountable scandal – just as the first disciples were scandalised by the prospect of eating this bread. ⁶ "This is [indeed] a difficult teaching;" they observe on behalf of all of us, "who can accept it?"

The answer to this question is that none of us can accept it by our own cleverness or righteousness or act of will alone. It is Another, the one we call God, who overcomes the scandal that we ourselves resist: "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me." ⁷ "Did I not choose you?" ⁸ To consume such flesh is to become conscious of the fullness of our humanity and our divinity. "Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood [of the Son of Humanity] abide in me, and I in them." ⁹ Thus, if we can muster the courage to willingly and consciously eat such a communion with our selves, as with Christ, when we come to the Table of Christ, if we are willing to consume our own difficult and complex flesh, despised and deposed by one-sided rationalism and spiritualism – then we can know ourselves as flesh which is offered, blessed, broken and given, for the life of the world.

Little wonder that instead of answering their question Jesus simply declares that such flesh is bread that leads to eternal life! ¹⁰

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⁵ John 6:54

⁶ John 6:66

⁷ John 6:44

⁸ John 6:70a

⁹ John 6:56

¹⁰ John 6:58b