

John 6:51-58

The first chapter of the gospel of John, the very beginning sentences, tell us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. God's Word, the breath that breathed over the void and created the world. The breath that blew into Adam, the first man, and gave him life, the breath that blew over the valley of dead bones and brought them back to life, became human. The Word of God became human and breathed the breath of life, the same air that humanity breathes. The Word of God, walked among us and gave us new life through his death and resurrection.

Before he died Jesus told people that eating his flesh and drinking his blood will give them life. When we hear it this way, it sounds sort of revolting. People who are not raised as Christian probably hear this and think we are a group of cannibals. But we know that is not how it is meant. Jesus is speaking in hyperbole in this passage. However, as shocking as this sounds to us Christians, the Jewish people of Jesus' time would have had an even more difficult time with what Jesus said. The Torah forbid them to eat anything with blood. According to the Jewish law an animal had to be totally drained of blood before being eaten. So being told that drinking blood would give them life would go against what they had been taught their entire lives.

We understand that Jesus meant his blood is the wine we partake in the sacrament of Holy Communion, his body is the bread that is consumed in the same holy meal. Christ again becomes a part of human existence with each holy meal. Jesus who took on human flesh at his birth, once again takes on human flesh as the bread and wine become a part of us. What an intimate relationship we have with God.

Can you imagine a human being creating such a God who wants to be so close to us that they become a part of us? To think that God wants to be a part of us.... This is proof that God is real, that God is not some whim that was made up to help people cope with life. And God lives. The word incarnate lives in each of us.

John has already told us that Jesus is the Word of God in human form, having said that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). And we know that this Word made flesh was not destined to live a long and happy earthly life, because "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (3:14-15). Jesus is going to have to be lifted up on the cross, sacrificing his own flesh to bring us forgiveness and everlasting life, to which he alluded in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Living bread. Word made flesh. Lifted on the bloody cross. Given for the life of the world. Through Jesus we have everlasting life, but the Jewish people of the day began to argue among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (v. 52). When Jesus spoke to them about "living bread," they had a sense of what he was talking about because they remembered the bread from God -- the manna -- that their ancestors had eaten in the wilderness. But his flesh? That didn't make any sense.

"Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (v. 53). His images have shifted from warm bread to something apparently more sinister. There is no longer any doubt that Jesus is going to have to give his flesh and shed his blood, and that his followers will need to eat and drink his sacrifice. Jesus is giving his whole self to us, and inviting us to eat him up. Just reading or saying that can make one's skin crawl.

Obviously, and we should stress obviously, Jesus does not mean this in any literal sense of the language. There is no cannibalistic Jewish tradition his listeners would have understood. No wonder they were confused. And they were not on this side of the cross, they didn't have the same understanding of Jesus' word. So many people, even some of those who were nominal disciples, left Jesus at this point thinking, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

Out of this shocking message comes the promise of eternal life. Consuming Jesus is not a leisure pursuit, one that can be done just a few minutes a day. Taking Jesus into ourselves is a full-time challenge, one that transforms us from the inside out. After all, "you are what you eat." "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life," promises Jesus, "and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (vv. 54-57).

If we take Jesus into ourselves, we are given eternal life. Don't expect to understand it. Believe it and be grateful.

After so much talk of flesh and blood, Jesus returns to the image of bread. He says about himself, "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" (v. 58). The ingredients of bread and wine, flesh and blood all mix together. They form an unexpected meal, one that nourishes us spiritually and fills us with everlasting life.

The challenge for us is to stay close to Jesus, receive his nourishment and do his work in the world. This is not a leisure pursuit, one that can be done off and on. Jesus wants us to remain with him, even when it gets uncomfortable.

Since Jesus is the word of God in human form, we can always be strengthened by what he says to us in the gospels. His words are trustworthy and true, and he remains for us "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Next, we can be nourished by communion, the holy meal that includes the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Jesus instructs us to eat and drink of the bread and the wine to remember him, in other words, to honor him. Receiving communion is an important way of living in Christ, and allowing him to live in us.

Finally, we can go out to be the body of Christ in the world. Christians who feast on the words of Jesus and nourish themselves with communion become nothing less than the flesh-and-blood presence of Jesus in the world today. We can be the hands and feet of Jesus, no matter who we are or where we are in life.

We are the body of Christ, the Church, who was created not to serve ourselves, but to serve an awesome God. When, at the end of the worship service you hear, "Go in peace. You are the Body of Christ" may you have a different understanding of who and whose we are.

All glory be to God.