

John 6.51-58

Today's gospel includes one of the most shocking things that Jesus ever says.

We are in St. John's gospel, in the story of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus's subsequent speech about himself as the bread of life. It's a long story, and we have been listening to it for four weeks now (and we will hear the end of it next week). But this week, Jesus says, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven ... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man [that is, himself] and drink his blood, you have no life in you.'

If you heard that knowing nothing about the context, it would sound like cannibalism. And some non-Christians in the early centuries did accuse Christians of cannibalism because they talked about eating flesh and drinking blood. Even people who didn't assume that Christians were cannibals would have been shocked by this language: especially Jews and Jewish Christians, because the Law of Moses commands that all the blood must be drained out of any animal before it is eaten. Blood is life, so Jews never consume it.

So what is going on here?

For a start, I think we can be sure that Jesus, in his earthly life, did not say these words, because this passage is about the meaning of his death. Jesus quite likely did come to realize that he would end up being killed, because he was such a threat to the authorities, but he probably didn't know it as early as this in his ministry, and he would not have known how it would happen. This saying represents John the Evangelist speaking theologically, with hindsight, through Jesus, about the meaning of his death.

This in itself is quite challenging for us, because, of course, we want to know what Jesus himself taught. But all the gospels are a mixture of memories of what Jesus taught in his earthly life and explorations of how his followers can understand him after his death and resurrection (and distinguishing the two is a whole field of New Testament study). But what we don't need to feel is that John is somehow trying to trick us, here, into believing that Jesus said something he didn't. It was a well-known literary technique at the time to give person in a text words to say that explored the meaning of their life and teaching. It's a way of making that exploration vivid and engaging, and contemporary writers did it with the figures of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and many others.

In fact, we do it too. Machiavelli said, 'The end justifies the means.' Mahatma Gandhi said, 'You have to be the change you want to see in the world.' Jim Lovell said, 'Houston, we have a problem.' Except that none of them did say any of those things! But these, and many other apocryphal sayings do capture vividly something true and significant about the nature of a situation or how a person thought.

So John is trying to capture something about the meaning of Jesus's life and ministry by making Jesus talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. But it is still a shocking and off-putting image, so we can still ask, why does he use it?

Last week I talked about how John's gospel often offers a kind of commentary or spiritual reflection, not only on the person of Jesus himself, but on St. Mark's gospel, which John, and quite likely also his community knew. Today's passage is a reflection on Mark's story of the last supper, where Jesus blesses bread and wine and says, 'This is my body ... this is my blood'. In that story, Jesus is saying that he is going to give his body and blood for his followers, just as he gave them the bread and wine. Behind it may lie the idea that Jesus is like the Passover lamb, which is sacrificed and its blood shed to keep the Israelites safe in Egypt. Another idea in

the background may be that, in the ancient world, blood was shed to seal any new covenant between God and God's people, and Christians understood Jesus as making a new covenant between God and humanity.

But it's one thing to remember covenant-making and the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, and another to talk about consuming human flesh and blood. So I think there is still something else going on in this passage. I suspect that John is trying to illustrate just how radically we depend on Jesus for our spiritual life. Nothing will give us life except, in some way, consuming Jesus himself.

Some later Christian writers said the same thing using different images. The mediaeval English mystic Julian of Norwich, for instance, talked about Jesus as our mother, who feeds her children with her milk. The idea of a mother feeding her children with her own body is much less shocking to us than the idea of eating flesh and blood, but it is a very similar concept. And, funnily enough, once again, we use images like this ourselves to express one person's radical dependence on another. I have a dear friend, who, when she had children, lost a lot of weight. She explained to me, 'Of course, children eat you up' – meaning that they take so much energy that you lose flesh, and it's as if you are giving yourself to them. In much less controversial terms, this is not unlike what Jesus says. And sometimes when a person is very popular and in demand, you hear people say, 'Everyone wants a piece of them.' Again it's a similar idea – people want somebody so much, it's as if they want chunks out of them. So in our own everyday speech, we recognize the idea that when a person gives everything to others, and when other people depend absolutely on that person, in a sense they get consumed.

John, I think, is trying to express how absolutely Jesus's followers depend on him, and how radically he gives himself to them for their spiritual life. And he does it using an image which Jesus himself may indeed have used, on the last night of his life, when he blessed bread and wine and said, just as I am giving this bread and wine for your physical life, I will give my life to give you eternal life.

We may still wish that John could have expressed this idea some other way.... We can, though, appreciate what he was trying to do. He was trying to make us feel how deeply we need to absorb Jesus into our lives and make him part of everything we are and do.

Faith in Jesus Christ, and the life it gives us, are not just something we 'have'. They become part of who we are, and shape everything we think and say and do. And if we let it, faith gradually, eventually, remakes us, body and soul, until we become again what we were made to be: life created out of God, that lives eternally in God.

Amen

(Sandford-on-Thames)