

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
12 Pentecost, Proper 15B, August 15, 2021 by The Rt. Rev Gordon P. Scruton

Proverbs 9:1-6. Psalm 34:9-14. Ephesians 5:15-20. John 6:51-58.

If Jesus was here preaching this morning, do you think you would find his words inspiring...or do you think you might leave feeling confused or even angry about what he said? I ask this question because sometimes we can be so familiar with the words of Jesus that we forget how confusing and upsetting some of his words were to the people who first heard him.

For example, in today's Gospel, a crowd of people gathered to be with Jesus. Some had heard about Jesus and were curious. Others had been following him around for a while. Someone in the crowd asked a question and Jesus responded, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The crowd started whispering cynically among themselves: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus spoke again. Listen carefully to why his words were so confusing and offensive to the crowd. He says, "Really, I'm telling you the truth, 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; 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."

Can you hear how outrageous and confusing these words of Jesus must have sounded? They made no sense. It was repulsive and offensive to the crowd to hear Jesus say they should be like cannibals, eating his flesh and blood. Since most of the crowd were Jews, it was especially scandalous to talk this way because God had commanded them NOT to eat blood.

Listen to the words of Deuteronomy 12 (v 23-25): "Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat...Do not eat it, so that all may go well with you and your children after you, because you do what is right in the sight of the Lord." Kosher meat has no blood in it, in obedience to this commandment. So the primarily Jewish crowd heard Jesus asking them to do something that was both forbidden by God and socially offensive.

As we'll hear in the continuation of this story next Sunday, many of the crowd and even some of Jesus close followers walked away from him that day because they found his words so offensive. Often it takes time for us to recognize what Jesus is trying to communicate to us. John frequently calls attention to the symbolic way Jesus used language to shock people into being aware that God was doing something more profound than their logical minds could grasp. It wasn't until after Christ's death and resurrection that the early Christians began to recognize what Jesus was saying in today's Gospel.

After Pentecost, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the early followers of Jesus saw the connection between the Passover meal Jesus celebrated at the Last Supper and the new Eucharistic meaning Jesus gave to the words used at that supper. The Greek word for “flesh” that Jesus used at the last Supper and in today’s Gospel is the literal translation of the Hebrew word *basar*, which is the word used for “bread” in the Passover meal. So, the early followers of Jesus recognized that they could eat the flesh of Jesus by eating the bread of the Eucharist. When Jesus said, “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,” his words are echoed the Eucharist: “this is my body which is given for you.”

Down through the centuries, Christians have been in awe when they recognize that in receiving the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist, they are actually receiving the life-giving presence and power of Christ into their bodies. Through the Holy Spirit’s animating presence, Christ’s life blood flowed into their blood. This was the medicine of God, the food of the heavenly banquet, a foretaste of eternal life with God. Christ came to dwell in them and they in him, both for this life and continuing on into Eternal Life.

We give special thanks for Christ’s gift of the Eucharist every Maundy Thursday. Yet, probably none of us have fully grasped the profound depths of what Christ seeks to do in and through us when we receive his body and blood. We all have more learn and experience about God’s work through this Holy Sacrament. We can become so familiar with this ritual of receiving communion ...that we forget the awesome reality of what is happening.

Christ comes to us through bread and wine, not just for our personal spiritual benefit and consolation. The Spirit of Jesus comes to us to guide and empower us, so that the Light and Love of Christ can flow through us into the needy people and situations that surround us, day by day. Christ’s love flows into us and feeds us so we can love and feed others as Christ’s representatives in this generation. When we recognize Christ coming to us in the Eucharist, we may also have eyes to recognize Christ coming to us in the needs of our neighbors.

This profound gift and mystery of Christ coming to live in us through the Eucharist raises a question for us to ponder. If Christ really comes to live in us as we receive the Eucharist, why is it that so often we Christians do not speak and act like Christ did? If Christ really comes to flow in our blood streams, why do we not reflect more of the character of Christ in the way we live? Why do we Christians sometimes think, speak and act so unlovingly about each other and our neighbors? Why do we contribute to the dishonesty and injustice, the hostility and divisiveness of our society and world?

As I’ve wrestled with these troubling questions, I’ve come to see that when Christ walked this earth, he never forced people to do anything. When they asked for his help, he helped them. When they walked away from him, he let them walk away.

When we open our mouths to receive the body and blood of Christ, Christ always comes to us. But how much do we allow Christ to guide and change the way we think and speak and live? If we walk out of worship this morning and continue to make decisions as if we are in charge of our lives; if, as we live the rest of this week, we never think about the

Christ who came to us in bread and wine this morning, then Christ lets us do our thing. Christ allows us to ignore him, just like the father allowed the prodigal son to walk away and do his own thing, squandering the inheritance given to him by his father.

The Eucharist is not magic. Christ wants to transform our thoughts and words and actions so that we are an extension of Christ in the way we live our lives in this generation. But Christ will only change us from the inside out if we ask Christ to be in charge of our lives each morning and seek God's guidance throughout each day as we make decisions and respond to people and situations.

Sunday Eucharist alone, is not enough to keep us living in the flow of Christ's Presence. Through the centuries, Christians have found that if we really want the life and love of Jesus to flow in and through our lives, helping us love our neighbors as we love ourselves, as Christ did, we will need to ask the Spirit of Jesus to help us develop little daily spiritual practices which can help us stay open and receptive to the ongoing guidance from the Presence of Christ who dwells within us.

We need spiritual practices like beginning every day asking God to help and guide us; like taking time to read and reflect on the Bible, listening for what God might want to say to us; like carrying on a continuous conversation with God through the challenges of each day, and as we end each day. We need a community of spiritual friends we talk with regularly, who help us with our questions and share our joys and struggles as we seek to allow Jesus to guide and shape the way we live.

Christ always comes to us in the Eucharist, but what kind of a welcome do we give Christ? How much do we allow Christ to change and guide the way we live? Do we just allow Christ into our digestive system and let him pass out without allowing him to have any influence in our lives?

Or do we honestly desire to live in constant communion with the Christ who comes to us in bread and wine so that the love of Christ who dwells in us, can shape our character, our daily thoughts, words, and actions, helping us love our neighbors as ourselves, praying with Jesus, "Not my will, but your will be done"?

Let's close our eyes...and in the silence be aware the loving presence of Jesus here with us now. What changes might Jesus be asking you to make in your life this week so that you can more intentionally allow his awesome Presence, which will flow into your body in the Eucharist today, to keep guiding the way you think and speak, live and love every day this week?...

O Christ, grant us grace to open ourselves to receive your coming to us through scripture and through bread and wine so that our daily lives may show forth the evidence of your loving presence shining through all our thoughts, words, deeds and relationships, that others may look at us and see, not us, but your life radiating through our lives for the healing of this broken world. Amen.