

**A Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost
at St. John's Church, Norwood Parish
20 August 2006**

Proper 15: Proverbs 9:1-6; John 6:53-59

In this morning's appointed Gospel reading, there is something to offend just about everyone!

For the properly-pious keepers of the Laws of Moses, it is bad enough that Jesus has referred to himself as "I AM" -- as in "I am the bread of life." Every time Jesus says, "I am .." - and Jesus says this a lot in the Gospel according to John -- there is an echo of God's self-identification to Moses on the mountaintop: Moses had asked for God's name, and God had responded, "I am." Yes, Jesus had fed the people with bread, 5,000 of them on the other side of the lake; but even so, such manna-in-the-wilderness divine behavior is not sufficient reason for Jesus to refer to himself by God's own name. For Jesus to refer to himself by God's own name was considered blasphemous to those who heard these words.

Jesus then compounds the blasphemy, by saying that the people must eat of this bread -- the bread which is his own flesh -- to have the gift of eternal life. How can this be? How can he give his own flesh to be eaten? They are taking him literally and thinking, 'What kind of whacko cannibalistic nonsense is this?' One of the advances of the Jewish religion over the religions of the other nations was that Judaism was clear that God did not want, did not accept and did not approve of human sacrifice. So how could Jesus be talking about giving his flesh to be eaten?

And then to add a total gross-out, Jesus compounds the blasphemy with heresy when he says, they must also drink his blood. Well, that was just too much! Every properly pious Jew knew that in the blood was the gift of life, and the Jewish holiness codes absolutely forbade the consuming of the blood of animals. Life belonged to God, and kosher dietary requirements, then and now - still observed in the kosher delicatessens we all patronize -- strictly forbade anything like consuming blood. But here Jesus was saying that to have eternal life, his body and his blood must be consumed. No way was any properly pious Jew going to hear this literally with out revulsion.

Frankly, if we hear this literally, we probably share their revulsion. Taken literally, we would also find such flesh-eating, blood-drinking talk absolutely revolting, let alone blasphemous and heretical. As if to prove this point, we often skip the third verse in the hymn, "I am the bread of life." This whole hymn is a

paraphrase of the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John, and the third verse is the offending line from today's Gospel reading. The composer, Sr. Suzanne Toolan's paraphrases the verse this way: "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood, you shall not have life within you." Then she adds enough repetition to really drive home the offensive point.

But according to John, Jesus said these offensive things; so what are we to make of them? The first is for us who gather under the banner of John as our patron saint for this church -- the first thing for us to remember is how John begins his account of the Gospel: In John's prolog we find -- "The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us." In John's telling of the Gospel, there will be no avoiding the scandal that the God of absolutely everything took on a fully human life in the person of Jesus -- that in Jesus God took on human flesh and blood to dwell with us. We hear an echo here in John, of our reading from Proverbs. In Proverbs, the Wisdom of God sets the banquet table and invites all to simply come and eat -- to leave off all their preconceptions and in all simplicity come and eat. In John, Jesus the Word, sets the banquet, and invites all to come and eat -- to leave off all that gets in the way, and simply come and receive the gift to sustain life at its fullest in relationship with God, now and always.

The challenge here is to lay aside the temptation to hear these words with simple-minded literalism, but instead to hear these words in the context of the rest of John's account of the Gospel. With John's emphasis on the Word of God en-fleshed in Jesus, another word for en-fleshed being incarnate, (can you hear echoes of "carnal" and "carnivore" in the tidy theological term "incarnate"?) with God incarnate in Jesus, John would have us understand that Jesus is offering other en-fleshed, incarnate beings, like his first hearers and like you and me, is offering us all incarnate bread to sustain our bond with him. Jesus doesn't just offer us fine ideas, or high-minded thoughts to sustain our journey; Jesus provides with us real bread that we can really eat and real wine that we can really drink. Real bread and real wine to really nourish us with the real presence of Jesus in our real, en-fleshed, incarnate lives.

This is not a disembodied, ephemeral spirituality, but a spirituality which takes flesh and blood lives -- Jesus' own and ours, seriously. Well, that is all well and good some of Jesus first hearers and we may say, but is the bread that we will break and the wine that we will share really Jesus body and blood? The classic Anglican response is, Well, Jesus said it is. Some of you are way ahead of me; you know me well enough, or have heard me speak on this before, and are thinking -- when he is going to quote John Donne and Queen Elizabeth the First? Your wait is over: John Donne, the poet and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in

London, and Queen Elizabeth I, both responded to this question about the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine in similar words:

He was the Word who spake it;
he took the bread and he brake it,
and what his word doth make it,
I do believe and partake it.

This is the classic Anglican response to the question of the real presence of Jesus in bread and the wine; classic Anglican theology doesn't do backflips over transubstantiation or consubstantiation, or other explanations about memorial meals. The classic Anglican way is not to explain God, but in all humility to trust God revealed in Jesus. So again, taking John's presentation of Jesus as the incarnate word of God seriously, the classic Anglican explanation of the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine is not an explanation at all, but a poetic statement of faith. Recalling the very opening of John's account of the Gospel, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God... All things came into being through him." So John Donne and Elizabeth I -- "*He was the Word who spake it*" Jesus was the word who called all that goes into making the bread into being. "*He took the bread and he brake it*" Jesus took hold of the bread at the Last Supper and he broke the bread. "*And what his word doth make it*" -- what Jesus words made of the bread, words we recall in the consecration prayer -- "This (bread) is my body broken for you." "*I do believe and partake it.*" Setting our hearts on what Jesus' creative words make of the bread and the wine, we do eat and drink it.

We will sing "I am the bread of life" as our dismissal/closing hymn today. And the third verse is not omitted today. If these words from the Gospel cause you distress, I hope your distress will trigger a recollection of the words of John Donne and Elizabeth

*"He was the Word who spake it,
he took the break and he brake it,
and what his word doth make it,
I do believe and partake it."*

Setting our hearts on God's real and abiding presence with us, I hope we can sing with confidence and trust in Jesus revealed and truly present with us in the bread and the wine.

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