

Sermon for Proper 16 Year B

(RCL) 1 Kings 8: (1, 6, 10-11) 22-30, 41-43 and Psalm 84 (Track 2: Joshua 24:1-20, 14-18 and Psalm 34: 15-29); Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

During Pentecost of Year B of the Lectionary, we have been studying the Gospel of Mark. However, for the past four Sundays we have digressed in order to delve into the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. Today, on the fifth Sunday of trying to absorb the signs and words of Jesus, we conclude this remarkable study on the meaning of Bread, at once corporeal, spiritual, and metaphorical.

There are few words in the English language that are as heavy with meaning and metaphor as the word “bread.” A poor woman in Greece comes to mind. She had had a very hard life both during the war years and immediately afterward. At a time when there were no washing machines, she was trying to survive by washing other people’s clothes. This woman would not allow even a stale piece of bread to be casually discarded; she had such reverence for it that she would kiss it before letting go of it. Somewhere inside her, even though she could not understand the difficult ecclesiastical Greek of the Eucharist, she acted in a manner of a priest with consecrated bread. For her, bread meant both survival and holiness.

Today, reading this gospel passage makes the reverence of a humble, illiterate woman understandable even to those who have studied theology and have delved into the intricacies of language. We are walking on holy ground as we hear Jesus saying, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” And later, “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died.”

The disciples murmur among themselves, “This is a hard saying, difficult to take.” Like so many of Jesus’ words, these were offensive to those who adhered to tradition in their religious practices and understanding. Jesus knows it: “Does this offend you?” he asks them.

Archbishop William Temple in his superb study, *Readings in Saint John’s Gospel*, makes it quite clear that eating the bread means receiving the power of self-giving and self-sacrifice, while drinking the blood means receiving the life that is triumphant over death. He says that both elements are essential for the full reality of the sacrament to be effected:

“It is not the momentary eating but the permanent abiding that is of primary importance. ... The sacrament is normally necessary; but it is the communion alone that is vital.”

And this communion is found in abiding in the Son as the Son abides in the Father. What comes through in this magnificent sixth chapter of John is the sense of abiding, a word that denotes continuity and communion – a kind of security in the Spirit, an assurance that we will not be cast out into the void.

Those of Jesus’ followers who were attracted to him because of his popularity and his healing miracles find these sayings hard to take. So on that day, many left the community of Jesus. They were not alone: many who carry the name of Christ today are offended by the miracle of the Incarnation.

It is even in vogue today for people to claim to be “spiritual” without having any church affiliation or even any religious conviction. We hear it in all walks of life: “Oh, I am spiritual, but not religious.”

Archbishop Temple calls this “a vague religiosity which has no definite and critical moments, no fixed religious practice, no cutting edge.”

Jesus was not confrontational when many of his followers, finding his sayings hard to take, left him. Jesus didn't stop them; he let them go. Throughout his ministry, he let those who were offended go. Unlike many of us, he used no PR, no gimmicks, and, above all, no magic to hold on to his followers. He allows us our freedom in the same poignant manner he used with his closest friends – the Twelve. One can imagine the sadness in his eyes, the wistfulness in his voice as he asks them: “Do you also wish to go away?” And Peter, being truly spiritual – inspired by the Holy Spirit – answers for all of the disciples, “Lord, to whom can we go?”

After seeing the Light, how can any of us go to the Dark? After tasting living water, how can we drink what is rancid? After knowing the goodness of Life, how can we willingly choose death? After knowing you, Lord, to whom can we possibly go? As Peter said to Jesus, “You have the words of life eternal.”

Peter, together with the other followers of Jesus who stayed to the end, would feed on these eternal words as we are asked to do, Sunday after Sunday, when we receive “the Bread of Life, the Cup of Salvation.”

Again and again in Saint John's gospel, the crucial key to understanding is the miracle of the Incarnation. If indeed the Word became flesh, “if that occurred, nothing else is marvelous,” William Temple reminds us.

Once we accept the miracle of the Incarnation, all other miracles, all other signs, together with the words of life eternal, find their proper place in creation. If we accept that, the greatest of all marvels, nothing else is marvelous indeed. We abide in the marvel of the Word that became flesh, the Bread of life.

Thanks be to God.

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