

12 Pentecost - 23 August 2009 - Proper 16 B
1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
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A fellow priest commented recently about preaching from the Gospel readings for this month of August. "Bread, bread, bread!" he said. "How much can I think of to say about bread? Remind me," he added, "when Year B of the Lectionary roles around again, to take the month of August for my vacation."

I'm glad to be back from vacation. And I say this not because I somehow managed to avoid for the most part a repeated emphasis at this time of the Church's year upon Jesus' teaching of the familiar if mysterious metaphor of 'bread, bread, bread' as somehow representative of, or equivalent to, his flesh. To the contrary, I'm glad to be back with this, my community of faith because while distance may 'make the heart grow fonder,' yet it is proximity that enables trust in God to do what it is meant to do.

Here, then, together, where we belong, where we find our sense of belonging, we reach the pinnacle of Jesus' teaching on the Bread of Life and his body and blood given over for the sake of all. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. ...so whoever eats me will live because of me." When Jesus says these words his first would- be followers are troubled. These words, these images, these ideas are disturbing for them.

The same is true later on, for the earliest generations of the Church. In the first decades after Jesus ascends to heaven, as the good news spreads of God having come in person in Jesus of Nazareth, Christians are recalling and repeating these very words of Jesus: "This is my flesh, take and eat. This is my blood, take and drink." When other people hear these words, those not initiated to the fellowship of the Church, or when they learn that the Christians are saying them, they leap to the conclusion, the rather natural conclusion, that the Christians are guilty of cannibalism. And the early Christians are thus forced to defend their practice of faith to a skeptical outsider's view of things. And so is born that art of systematic theology, thanks be to God.

I can attest to this disturbing misunderstanding from personal experience. Among those of us at the

divinity school I attended, being a non-denominational and multi-faith institution, a number were challenged by the passionate outburst one day of a student who, not being a Christian, accused those of us who were of glorifying the practice of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the dead. It was a repugnant thing to think of it. And it rightfully required of us that we try to be able to articulate for the skeptical a meaningful understanding of these words that lie at the heart of Jesus' teachings and of our own beliefs.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. ...so whoever eats me will live because of me." When these tentative followers of Jesus are hearing these words for the first time, surely some of them at least are wondering if somehow this might be their meaning. Whatever it is they think his words mean, many, we hear, find this teaching difficult to accept, and many of his disciples turn back and no longer follow him.

How do people understand these words in Jesus' day? How do people understand them now, today?

"The purpose of many statements of belief is not so much to convey direct information, as to keep the door open to what can be stated only paradoxically." So writes John Hapgood, former Church of England Archbishop of York, in his book titled *Varieties of Unbelief*. Christians all over the world today are receiving the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. Like us, they recall the words that Jesus used at that first Communion between himself and his disciples with words akin to those we use: 'Take eat, this is my flesh,' and 'Drink this, it is my blood.' And none of us, I dare say, holds the idea that Christians hold these words to be absolutely literally true. Even the doctrine of transubstantiation held by Roman Catholicism, and by some Protestant Churches, as well, is a rhetorical attempt to help people avoid a belief that is so literal that it would be not only repugnant but also empty of meaning. So, if not literally true, then what?

In his day, as we hear this morning, King Solomon has built a Temple for God. This is something that David, Solomon's father and the previous King of Israel, had wanted to do. Now Solomon has accomplished the wish of

his father, and has brought to the Temple, to the innermost location within it, to the 'holy of holies,' the ark of the covenant. It is a box, a treasure chest of sorts, containing the stone tablets upon which are inscribed the Ten Commandments, representing the agreement between God and God's people that each shall belong to the other.

The ark is fashioned to be also a throne, whereupon sits, from time to time, the presence of God. With the ark of the covenant now housed in the Temple, the Temple becomes the focal place for the people's worship of God. 'Hear the prayers that I make,' says Solomon to God, 'and that your people make toward this place.' 'When a foreigner prays toward this house,' Solomon continues, "then hear the foreigner's prayers, too; so that everyone everywhere may learn that your name has been given to this Temple.'

But Solomon, in his legendary wisdom, knows enough to question more deeply. "Will God indeed dwell on earth?" he asks. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" Solomon himself wonders about the difficult teaching around the literal presence of God abiding literally in this place.

George Pattison, scholar and Dean of King's College, Cambridge University, has written of the limits and benefits of the use of language in the art and science of theology. Pattison writes in his book titled *The End of Theology and the Task of Thinking About God*, and I'm paraphrasing here just a bit, that for theologian, to which I would add, simply for anyone thinking about God, "Language [is] privileged over all other media of communication... but only on the condition that it is in the service of... a more-than-linguistic-reality." Which is to say that for the most part, we prefer to use language to think of and to speak of God, but that we do so with the understanding that we are thinking of and speaking of a reality that is greater than language can convey.

It is helpful, I think, to note that so rich a tradition as our own in the Episcopal Church seems to have long understood this, even if it rarely ever discusses it. Our worship of God, necessarily expressive of our experiences of God, involves many media of communication other than the use of language alone. We make music, or at the very least we make the attempt. Our beloved Mike Stout knew

the limitations of music to convey the reality to which we refer when we think or speak of God. But he knew even better, and brought the rest of us to know, the *virtues* of music, sweet, powerful, transportive; able to bring us to knowledge of God that mere words cannot contain.

Our use of posture: kneeling, standing, sitting; our use of physical action: bowing, making the sign of the cross, eating, drinking; these all communicate to ourselves and to those around us, and in some way also to God, that we are concerned with and willingly are a part of that reality that we can never fully grasp; and that this is the reality whose grasp of us we give ourselves over to consciously, fearfully, and eagerly.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood," says Jesus; "abide in me and I in them. ...so whoever eats me will live because of me." "The sense of God's presence," writes former Archbishop Hapgood, "...[is] a whole way of thinking and experiencing [that] can be lost if deprived of the context of community, language, and activity in which its significance [finds] expression." Hard for those in Jesus' day, and hard still today, and hard still today, to trust the notion that God would indeed dwell on earth, would indeed live as one of us, would indeed live *for* each us and for all us. Easy enough to relieve ourselves of thinking or speaking of 'bread, bread, bread,' or of anything else of God, except in those ways that comply with the limitations of our ability or interest to do so.

But far more blessed, far more connected with the fullness of reality to be here today, among the flesh and blood community of God's people; to experience God's trust in us through thought, and word, and deed, and song, and touch; to find strengthened and inspired our flesh and blood expression of our trust in God; until we come here together next week again, and again it is enabled to do within us, and in the world around us, all that faith meant to do.

And so may Almighty and everlasting God, in whom are settled our doubts and fears by whom are blessed our questions and uncertainties, grant us grace to seek God's will, to find God's light, and in all, to glorify Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit One God, now and for ever. Amen.