

**XII Pentecost (16b)**

**Jn 6.60-69**

**23 August 2009**

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We come this morning in our Gospel lesson to the last portion of Jesus' famous "Bread of Life" discourse. We have been reading through it over these last several Sundays, and the words Jesus has spoken are "spirit and life" - we know that they are because Jesus tells us so. But they are at the same time strange and bizarre and even off-putting. "I am the true bread," he has said. Which sounds like a rather pedestrian but nice enough metaphor until he goes on - "The bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh." And then, "I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; [but] he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

So it's not too surprising to read this morning that those who have heard Jesus say these things begin to murmur and grumble against him and to say, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" And then, on having heard these things and a little bit more, we read that "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him."

This has been anything but "gentle Jesus meek and mild." In fact, this is Jesus at his most offensive - and, apparently, intentionally so. At every step following the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus is pushing the envelope of offense.

*Eat my flesh:* what a horrible thought; and the Greek word that the Evangelist uses here makes it clear that Jesus was going beyond mere metaphor - it more literally something like "chew my flesh."

And *Drink my blood:* for these devout Jews, for whom to consume any blood at all, any food not carefully slaughtered so as to avoid even a drop, is strictly forbidden by the law of Moses - much less the blood of a man. The very idea, the very words, are deeply offensive.

And *Unless you eat the flesh of the son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you:* in any important sense, Jesus is saying, from the point of view of God's holiness and righteousness you are as good as dead. It's very much like when earlier in this Gospel Jesus tells Nicodemus, "You must be born again." It's not exactly a complement.

Even while speaking words of life, he offends intellectually and aesthetically and culturally and religiously and, well, personally. If he's trying to be offensive, trying to drive people away, it works. They begin to leave rather than be insulted any more. *Many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.*

Well, we might ask, Why? Why is Jesus being offensive? Is there a method to this madness?

I think so, and maybe we can understand it if we think about it like this: Sometimes we can't receive a gift – or at least we can't receive the benefit of a gift – if we don't also and first receive some offense. One Christmas when I was in my 20's, my parents gave me a present. I unwrapped it, and it was a book. Which was nice - I like books. But the book in question was Stephen Covey's famous self-improvement tome, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Well, I knew what that meant: before it was a gift, it was a commentary; a judgment, even. I asked why I had been given such a gift and Mom & Dad just sort of raised their eyebrows. Apparently in their opinion, at 24 years of age, as good as jobless and happily so, and despite a very expensive parent-funded education, I was something less than *highly effective*. You see what I mean: you can't receive the benefit of a gift like that without also receiving some offense, without accepting the implied commentary. Some gifts just can only be received when we need, and *know that we need*, the gift.

Needless to say, I never read the book - and look at me now!

So, who can receive Jesus' gift? I've pointed out that these words of Jesus induce a moment of decision: from that time, *many drew back and no longer went about with him*. But of course some stayed. Some were willing to receive the offense, and so to receive the gift.

Jesus turned to his Apostles, who by the way cannot possibly have understood all that Jesus meant about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and eternal life and were certainly also taken aback by these shocking words, and he said, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Peter has an important and telling and instructive answer, "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

Those who stick with Jesus, those who are able to receive his gift, are not just humble in a general sense of confessing a certain amount of ignorance in certain matters in which they'd like to be further instructed. They are deeply humble in the strong sense of confessing themselves to be utterly helpless and desperately so. Peter and these other true disciples have learned what we all must: they have felt the offense and understood that the answer to their (and our) deepest problems of guilt and alienation and love and gratitude and life, the universe and everything is *not within themselves*. Any possible answer must come from the outside, from Another.

"To whom shall we go?" They at least understand that rejecting Jesus means that they'll have to keep looking somewhere else. These disciples may be stubborn; they may at times be obtuse, as the gospels often portray them. But they are not self-sufficient.

A long, long time ago in days of yore I was a lifeguard. And one of the things you learn in lifeguard training, and which I later learned better by experience, is that you cannot save someone who is still trying to save himself. You can't save a drowner who is still struggling to swim. It's only when the victim gives up, stops struggling, and allows himself to be wrapped up and carried by another to safety that the gift of rescue can be received.

A wise Puritan theologian once said that "the Gospel is not for the well-intentioned; it is for the desperate." Those desperate enough to give up the illusion of self-sufficiency and to throw all their weight upon Another. Those who need, and know that they need, the gift of rescue.

To whom shall we go? Jesus is a giver. He has a gift to give, a wonderful gift, a divine gift, a gift compared to which the best Christmas present any child has ever received is but type and shadow - the gift of himself whom to receive is life and life eternal. A gift of himself even unto death, of "one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, [for your sins and for mine] and for the sins of the whole world."

A gift and offering once given but re-presented and offered anew this morning on and from this altar.

And who can receive it? The desperate, the helpless, those who come with empty hands - those who need it and know that they need it, maybe even you and I.

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