

FEEDING ON HIS HUMANITY

St. Peter's, Wolvercote, 27th August 2006, 10.0am

John 6, v. 60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'

Our Gospel reading this morning represents *a turning point*. This is the moment when, for the first time, we read of the defection of many of Jesus' disciples. Up to now people have come to Jesus in large numbers. When he was in Jerusalem at the Passover many saw his miracles and believed in his name. Many came to be baptised by his disciples. Great things happened in Samaria, and in Galilee great crowds flocked after him. But now the tone changes. The story has reached the point of the first great division – the point at which we can for the first time speak of 'the disciples' on the one hand and 'the Jews' on the other. And as Jesus' veiled reference to Judas shows, it is a division present even in the innermost circle of the his own chosen Twelve. Many of his disciples turned back, but Judas did worse than that – he stayed as an undeclared enemy within the chosen group of friends.

The sixth chapter of St John's Gospel begins with the feeding of the five thousand, and the remainder of the chapter is not so much as single discourse as a summary of conversations on different occasions and perhaps on different days, but shortly after the miracle of feeding. It is possible too that St. John has introduced into the record here some parts of Jesus' later teaching which carries further the principle of what he taught at the time. Words actually spoken at the Last Supper may have been transposed to this part of the narrative, perhaps to make Jesus' words seem even more difficult that they were for people to accept, in order to account for the defection of so many disciples at this time. It is also possible that John is not giving, or trying to give, the actual words of Jesus. He has been thinking for seventy years of what Jesus said. Now, led by the Holy Spirit, he is giving the inner significance of his words.

What did Jesus say that some of his followers found so difficult? To us, of course, the ideas could hardly have been more familiar, because they have become central features of Christian worship over the past two thousand years:

‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven the one who eats this bread will live for ever.’

But we can imagine that if we heard such words for the first time we might well find them strange and fantastic. For the people of the time who were listening to Jesus, however, this is only partially true. What Jesus says about eating his flesh would not be wholly alien to anyone brought up in the religious ideas of ancient animal sacrifice, in which the god was held to enter into the flesh that was offered to him – when the worshipper ate he was literally eating the god. But the drinking of blood was another matter: the blood animals was regarded as the life (do we too not have the expression ‘the life blood’?) – in Deuteronomy and Leviticus there is a prohibition of eating the blood – ‘thou shalt not eat the life with the flesh’. These words of Jesus, then, would have been startling to the Jews. But the Mystery religions of those days also offered, through a kind of passion play, communion and even identity with some kind of god. Overall, then, the language John attributes to Jesus would therefore have had some resonance for his listeners. The point that particularly disturbs them seems to be the claim that he has come down from heaven – that his flesh is the bread from heaven sent by the living Father.

The Twelve disciples were well aware that Jesus had claimed to be the very mind and life of God come down to earth. Their difficulty was to accept that as true, with all its implications. So in our Gospel John presents Jesus as trying to prove his claim. In effect he forecasts the Ascension – ‘Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?’. His resurrection and ascension would be the guarantee of his claims.

Those of Jesus’ followers who turned back at this point no doubt did so for a variety of reasons. But some of them must have seen quite clearly where he was heading. How could he challenge the authorities with such claims and get away with it? He was surely heading for disaster, and it could be dangerous to be associated with him – better out while the going was good.

Others shirked the challenge Jesus was holding out. Fundamentally they had come to Jesus to get something from him. When it came to suffering for him and giving to him, they left him.

To Judas, Jesus was taking the wrong path. He had shared the excitement of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand – that offered a great opportunity, but now his Master was throwing it away. He missed the psychological moment, and deliberately dissipated the psychological fervour by talking in more and more difficult language about himself, making claims that people would find difficult to accept.

These early desertions, leading to a division between ‘the disciples’ and ‘the Jews’ foreshadow the subsequent division between Christians - those who accept the claims of Christ – and ‘the world’, a division that remains today. The Jews who heard Jesus in the Synagogue would of course know that his words were not meant literally - he was not commanding them to cannibalism. What then was he saying? The indispensable thing is that as followers of Christ they, and we today, should ‘feed upon him in their hearts’ – words we say and symbolise in the sacrament. When Jesus told us to eat his flesh and to drink his blood, he was telling us to *feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity* – to revitalise our lives with his *spirit and life*. The ultimate question is whether or not in Jesus *the Word became flesh* as the great prologue to St John’s Gospel asserts. If we believe this, the ultimate marvel, to be true, then we shall want to feed on him.

. We do this, of course, at the Eucharist, and it is clear that John has the Lord’s Supper very much in his mind as he renders this passage. But it is also true that St John’s Gospel has no account of the Last Supper. Rather he brings in his teaching about it, not in the narrative of the Upper Room, but following the story of a picnic by the Sea of Galilee. The significance of this is, perhaps, that for Christians every meal is a sacrament. We can find Jesus everywhere. This is not to belittle the sacrament but to expand it: we find Christ here in Church as we come together at the Lord’s Table, but we then go out to find him everywhere where men and women meet together to enjoy the gifts of God. As George Herbert made clear in his famous hymn, Teach me my God and King, in all things Thee to see – in words which used to bewilder me when we sang it in school assemblies – the all-important thing is the life-giving power

of the spirit: the real value of all that we do, however mundane and trivial, depends on the spirit in which it is done. When we feed on Christ's flesh and drink his blood, we symbolise the fact of living in his life and spirit in our everyday lives – we feed on his humanity.