

THE JESUS DIET PART V: A HARD TEACHING

A sermon by the Rev'd David J. Anderson, Church of St John the Evangelist, Hamilton, August 23, 2009.

Good morning. Here we are again! For those who have been paying attention, this is the fifth Sunday where the Gospel reading has been from this same chapter of John 6 with Jesus talking about bread.

WATCHING OUR DIET

I've entitled, the three sermons I've given on these texts, "The Jesus Diet". My doctor recently told me to pay some special attention to what I eat. As part of my last physical there was a routine cholesterol test. I was actually dreading the result of that test and had already prepared myself that it was going to be Lipitor for me. But when I went back into the doctor's office to discuss the results, I actually received some good news. I was very pleased to learn that my bad cholesterol was at a good level, the only issue was that I didn't have enough of the "good cholesterol".

Now this meant that at home I had to eat some crow, because Kathy had been encouraging fish oil supplements for the family for some time. I had loudly dismissed the whole idea of the need for such things. You would think that after twenty-odd years of marriage a guy would learn. The prescription is fish and nuts, and I am reading package labels looking for those Omega fatty acids.

Over the past five weeks we have seen that Jesus is concerned with what we are to eat. It all began with Jesus feeding the 5,000. The crowds of people had followed Jesus into the wilderness and he saw that they were becoming hungry and he had compassion for them. He fed them and they ate and they were satisfied. Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread and so we know that God is concerned about the issue of hunger. We learn from Jesus that we too should have compassion and should act to feed those who are hungry.

After Jesus has fed the crowd in this miraculous way, they are of course all the more eager to follow him, hoping of course for another great meal. So Jesus begins to challenge them about their reason for following. He tells them that he alone can fill another sort of hunger. While ordinary bread is needed for life, once it is eaten, we become hungry again. But Jesus speaks to them about satisfying their hungry hearts with true and living bread.

DO YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THIS?

In this Sunday's Gospel Jesus takes his talk about feeding on this living bread to an extreme. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

If there is ever a gauntlet thrown down in the Gospels by Jesus, it is here in this text today. Try to hear what Jesus is saying without thousands of years of the church's teaching about what happens when we take the bread and the wine in the Eucharist. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." It sounds so gross, so repugnant. Eating flesh and drinking blood sounds like cannibalism. In fact, the charge of cannibalism was not unfamiliar to the early church. "Eat my flesh and drink my blood." Are you kidding? What Jesus is saying is outrageous! So much so that John says, with probably some significant understatement, "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" Difficult! No kidding.

So Jesus hears that there is some murmuring and he stops them and asks, "Do you have a problem with this?" "Does this bother you?" "Eat my flesh and drink my blood—what, do you have some sort of problem with that? Is what I said is ticking you off? Wait'll you hear the next part, you'll blow a flippin' gasket!"

Today's reading actually leaves off two verses from the very end of John 6, which is really too bad, because this is where Jesus lets the other shoe drop. In those verses Jesus reminds the disciples that he has chosen them, and that, in fact, one of them is going to betray him. As if to say, "you say that you have some trouble eating my flesh and drinking my blood, but you will devour me."

"YOU WILL DEVOUR ME"

It is difficult to be told certain things. Someone has said that the truth will set you free but it may first tick you off. In particular it is difficult for us to be reminded as human beings that we are a killer species. There is no other species that I am aware of that is trying to destroy the planet. This difficult fact about who and what we are is one of the things that we are acknowledging every time we are offered the bread and the wine. Part of the Eucharist is remembering our Lord's death and in remembering we remember our role in his death, our own violence, the ways in which we deal in death instead of life. In the Eucharist we confess our culpability in the death of Christ. "You will devour me," Jesus says.

But the good news is that Jesus goes on to say that in devouring him, in eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we will find eternal life. In the end it is not really about culpability as much as it is about forgiveness. And as Jesus gives his life to us, as Jesus gives his life away, we learn that we too can give our lives away.

ABOUT THE EMERGING VISION FOR OUR DIOCESE AND “LIFE-CHANGING WORSHIP”

Yesterday I spent a full day in a diocesan meeting. Nine in the morning to four in the afternoon. On my way out of the house to the meeting in the morning Kathy asked me a question to the effect of, “Who at the Synod office did you annoy to the point where you have to spend a Saturday in August in a church basement in a meeting?”

It was difficult to give up a summer Saturday, but in the end I was glad I went to the meeting. The bishop asked me to be part of a small steering group that has been working on issues around vision. Yesterday’s meeting was a consultation with a larger group and there was some very good work done.

One of the ways that the emerging vision has been illustrated has been as five petals on a flower. One of the petals of the vision is what we have called, “life-changing worship.” Part of the work that we were doing yesterday was to ask the question about what might keep us from moving ahead with various aspects of the vision that we seem to be discerning from God. We asked it about each of the areas of the vision. But let’s think about life-changing worship. What would keep us from experiencing life-changing worship in our churches? What would keep us from experiencing it in our own parish?

Very often we are drawn to various technical answers to that question. Our worship would be more inspiring if we only changed the music: if we had the right instruments, if we had the right songs, if we had the right style of music. Or perhaps it is about the words. If only we had the right words. If only the book were purple. Or, if only the book were green. Or, if only the book were loose-leaf. Or, if only we didn’t have a book. Or maybe the issue is the preaching, or perhaps it is the candles.

We sometimes talk about all of these issues of our worship as though they were the most important things. But what is the number one limiting factor when it comes to life-changing worship? It is not any of these things at all, as much as we like to talk about them. The limiting factor is simply that most of us, most of the time, do not want our lives to be changed.

Most of us prefer would prefer entertaining worship, or at least comfortable worship. Life-changing worship is more than a little frightening. We don’t have to read much of the biblical story to figure out that when God shows up somewhere, very often lives are changed.

“YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT”: A TRANSFORMATIONAL FEAST

Jesus’ invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood is an invitation to a transformative experience where his life is lived in us. As the scripture says, “You are what you eat.” How might living Jesus’ life in our lives change the way we live? Can we honestly say that we are willing to cooperate with God’s Spirit in making those changes in our lives? There will be special moments of grace when some of us will say, “yes”. Anthony Thompson’s parents said “yes” for him last Sunday and we should pray for them and for all of us for the grace to follow through on that commitment. There have been times in

many of our lives when we have said “yes” to God. Perhaps today is one of those days for some.

IS THIS TOO HARD?

In today’s Gospels Jesus stops and asks the large group of followers, “Is this too hard?” We should be honest about the answer to that question ourselves. Is this too hard? Are we willing to eat the bread and drink the cup and all that it means? Are we willing to let the life of Jesus live in us?

Many left Jesus that day and no longer followed him. I’m praying that there is not a rush for the door this morning. And you know, I am pretty confident that there will not be, because I have come to know most of you well enough to know something about your history of saying “yes” to God.

After the crowds turned away and went home, Jesus was left with the twelve disciples and so he asked them, “Do you also wish to go away?” In response, Peter, speaking for the group, says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Peter understood that there was no other way.

THE INVITATION TO THE FEAST

This morning again we are invited to this Eucharistic table. We can treat this as a nice religious ceremony that conspires to keep Jesus at a comfortable distance but still leaving us feeling a pleasantly vague spiritual feeling, or we can be open to experiencing the living Christ who meets us in this Eucharist. We can eat and drink and be open to be filled anew with the life of Christ.

I am thinking that most of you will not duck out at the peace, but that together we will feast at this table asking God for the grace to say “yes” and from here continue to sort out what it means to journey together in the company of Christ who transforms our lives.