

Bread and Wine, Body and Blood

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 15, Year B, Track 2, RCL. John 6:51-58. August 19, 2018. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 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.” (John 6:54-57, NRSV)

What I just read is part of the famous bread of life discourse in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. It comes just before Jesus' disciples say “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” (John 6:60) Up till then it is Jesus' opponents, whom John calls “the Jews”, who keep arguing with him about his teaching on the bread of life. (Remember, Jesus' disciples were also Jews, so we are not to use rhetoric like this as an excuse to condemn Judaism.) But now Jesus' disciples have started complaining too, and some of them eventually stop following Jesus (John 6:66). (Again, remember that “the disciples” included many followers besides the core group of twelve.)

This argument over accepting Jesus as the bread of life is, among other things, John's way of telling us that one of the

chief stumbling blocks for converting people to Christianity in ancient times was its Eucharistic imagery. It was offensive to a lot of people—and not only people of a Jewish background—for Jesus to use very strong, very physical imagery about us taking his life into ourselves. It smacked strongly of cannibalism. And although it has always been common in religious rituals to consume food and drink as a way of sharing in the life of the supernatural realm, religions of Jesus' time and place drew the line at ritual cannibalism.

You and I are so accustomed to the body and blood imagery of the Eucharist that it has lost this cannibalistic overtone. But perhaps this goes along with a loss of the power—the shock value, if you will—of Jesus' teaching. Jesus was not one to avoid hyperbole; he had a lot to teach in his short three years of public ministry, and he spoke with riveting power and authority, so much so that some people—okay, quite a few people—thought he carried it too far.

So today I want to remind us that this ritual we celebrate on Sunday morning—the Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Mass, the Divine Liturgy, whatever name out of the Christian tradition you choose—is meant to assert as strongly as possible that God means to share his life with human beings (share it with the whole of his creation, really) in the most concrete, intimate, powerful, transformative and unending way. This cannot be carried too far; it is life and hope and joy

and love itself. It's the way God works, and it is part of his craftsmanship in creating, redeeming and sustaining however many universes there are.

This is not small potatoes, what we do around this altar, though it is quite routine and not always performed or received with either high drama or profound devotion. This is our assertion that Jesus Christ lived and died to make real, to make concrete and intimate to us, the life of God Almighty. This is our celebration of the end of sin and death, the beginning of new life, and the constancy of Love Himself.