

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Apr 16th 2016

Even when I was a child, when I received communion, it never crossed my mind that eating the body of Christ had anything to do with cannibalism. Years later, as an adult, it finally occurred to me that a total outsider, witnessing a Mass for the first time, and hearing the Bread of Life discourse from John 6, where Jesus speaks of eating his body and drinking his blood, would likely hear it as some kind of cannibalism. Today's Gospel reading speaks of some of the early followers of Jesus expressing that same sort of shocked response to Jesus' challenging words. Anyone familiar with Old Testament law knows that contact with blood—and, even more, drinking blood--was profoundly offensive to Jewish sensibility; indeed it was against the law. So it is easy to sympathize with those who found Jesus' speech about eating his flesh and drinking his blood a "hard saying."

So, how are we to understand Jesus' answer to those who find his teaching hard? The first thing to remember is that all of the Gospels were written after Easter, and from the perspective of Easter. That is, the evangelists write about Jesus' earthly ministry with the awareness that they are writing about the one they now know as the risen Lord Jesus Christ, and that perspective is most obvious in the Gospel of John. So when we read Jesus saying, "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?", I take that as a key to his meaning; the shocking words will make eminent sense after the resurrection, when his flesh will be transformed into a spiritual body accessed through faith, baptism, and in the community celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the light of Easter, John can preach in this Prologue that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." There, "flesh" stands for the human nature he took on by becoming human. That incarnation (literally, "enfleshment") was and remains the perfection of God's self-revelation in the eternal Son made flesh. But it took the resurrection transformation of that flesh to make the revelation complete. It is that form of Christ's flesh that Christians relate to in the practice of the Eucharist. It is also "bread from heaven" in the Jewish understanding of the manna in the wilderness whose deepest sense is wisdom. "It is not by bread alone that people live, but by all that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3b; and see Matt 4:4 and Luke 4:4). Our sharing of the meal of the Eucharist is not only a matter of eating, and becoming spiritually what we eat, but also of learning the wisdom of God about how to live. Christian life is an imitation of the self-offering of the Lord Jesus in service of one another.

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