

The gospel passage for today is at the end of Chapter six of John's gospel, which is a very busy chapter. It starts with Jesus feeding the five thousand, at the end of which we read "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say 'Surely this is the Prophet who is come in to the world'. Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king **"by force"**, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." Later that same day we have the story of Jesus walking on the water on his way back to Capernaum.

The next day the crowd left over from the previous miraculous feeding arrives in Capernaum looking for Jesus and he tells them not to work for food that spoils but food that endures to eternal life. Jesus follows this with a very clear statement "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty". Jesus follows this with "I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever".

With this as background let us look at the passage for today, a passage which is full of metaphors, symbolism and imagery. It starts with "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

WOW. This is quite a statement and it was made in a Synagogue. What would be the reaction of this congregation if a stranger walked up front during the service and made a statement like that? What would we say? What would we do? At the very least he would be asked to leave.

Well, the congregation in Capernaum seems to have reacted in several different ways. One group does not understand Jesus at all. These would include the least religious among them. "eating his flesh, drinking his blood", what is this man talking about. However most of the congregation would have understood that Jesus was speaking symbolically because contemporary Jewish understanding allowed for symbolic interpretation of "food and drink." To eat the flesh of Jesus is to absorb his entire way of being and living. The Greek word translated "flesh" is also used to refer to human nature in general, to the physical, emotional and mental aspects of human existence. Jesus is saying that he wants us to live, feel, think and act like him; and by the power of the Holy Spirit he enables us to do so. Likewise, to drink his blood is to absorb his self-sacrificing life-motivation and indeed his very life, since we are told in Leviticus "the life of the flesh is in the blood".

As the food we eat becomes incorporated with ourselves, so Christ and those who symbolically eat His flesh and drink His blood become spiritually one life, though personally distinct. I am reminded of the old dietician warning "you are what you eat". A believer who remains in Jesus enjoys intimacy with and security in Jesus. Just as Jesus has His life from the Father, so believers have life because of Jesus.

This passage then goes on “This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever”. With this statement Jesus is claiming divinity, that he is the Messiah. They knew that their ancestors who had eaten Manna had died, just as all people die, but Jesus is talking about living forever, that is eternal life. The remainder of the congregation, those who realized that Jesus was talking symbolically now has varied reactions.

The passage continues quote “On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’”

Up until now many had followed Jesus because they thought he might be the expected political Messiah who would free them from the Romans. As we read earlier, after the feeding of the five thousand they were looking to make Jesus king by force. This popular enthusiasm was now over, they saw that He was not going to deliver them from Rome, that he had a very different agenda. He was speaking of eternal life, not freedom from the Romans. He might be a great Healer, but to them His words were a hard teaching. It was not so much that Jesus’ teaching was hard to understand but hard to live by once you understood it. By speaking symbolically Jesus made them understand that to be his disciples they had to walk in his way. By this Jesus separated out those who were not sincere or for whom the cost of following Jesus was too high.

61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!

Those who wanted a political Messiah were “offended” by what he taught. The Greek word is “scandalized”. They stumbled over the fact that he claimed to come down from heaven. They also stumbled over the idea that they had to spiritually eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to be saved. But if they stumbled over these two matters, what would they do if they saw him ascend into heaven. The very resistance encountered by his words among these “would be disciples” demonstrated that their faith was superficial. Jesus knew His audience. The very thought of Jesus ascending to heaven is an offense to the Jewish establishment as it is alluding to the coming crucifixion, resurrection and ascension to heaven where Jesus is lifted up on the cross, lifted up from the dead, lifted up to heaven.

Jesus then continues “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life”. In this verse Jesus explained that His language was figurative and spiritual, not literal. There is no salvation in “flesh”. In fact the New Testament has nothing good to say about “the flesh”. Paul tells us there is nothing good in the flesh and we must put no confidence in it. Though the crowds assessed Jesus' words as "hard", actually His words are spirit and life. That is, by the work of the Holy Spirit in an individual, Jesus' words provide spiritual life. How, then, do we “eat his flesh and drink his blood”? Through the word of God. Jesus says “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life”. But there are many of the crowd that would not believe Jesus. To those who would not believe, his words were foolishness. John then adds that Jesus knew from the beginning who would betray him, but this was not the time to expose him.

Jesus went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." This verse makes sense because you cannot make a response to God's offer unless there is an offer from God.

From this time on many of his disciples turned away and no longer followed him. Those last words of our Lord seem to have been to them the finishing stroke; they could stand it no longer. Many a journey they had taken with Him, but now they finally gave Him up and no longer followed him. These fringe disciples were looking for a materialistic or military Messiah. Jesus offers spiritual life and most say no and leave. They went back to the old way, the old religion and the old hopeless situation. Jesus Christ is "the way" but they would not walk with him.

Jesus then turns his attention to the twelve and asks if they want to leave him and go with the others. The twelve would have been must disturbed by the desertion of so many of Jesus' followers, but Jesus wants them to declare themselves, that is "will you stay or will you go. But Simon Peter answered for them, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter, as usual the spokesman for the twelve, gave his confession of faith. The path may be difficult, but he was convinced that Jesus' words lead to life. No one else has the gift of eternal life. Peter was also confident of all the apostles' commitment to Jesus as the Holy One of God. This title is unusual, but it is another way of confessing Him as the Messiah.

The only mistake Peter made was to bear witness for the entire group. Peter was sure that all of the apostles were believers, which shows just how convincing Judas was. Even Peter did not know that Judas was an unbeliever who would betray Jesus. Had Judas truly believed that Jesus was the way to eternal life, he would never have betrayed him. Jesus' statements, based on the manna incident from Exodus, repeats the major themes: Moses' bread did not give lasting life and salvation does not come by the Law; God has sent the genuine life-giving Bread, in the form of Jesus down from heaven; and those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. This is a sort of summing up of the whole discourse. Jesus, instead of softening down His message, puts it in a symbolic form which some hearers, particularly the Pharisees, would clearly understand.

It should be added that although this passage has nothing to do with the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Sacrament has everything to do with this passage, as the visible embodiment of Jesus' body and blood to the believers. The food and drink we partake of are physically bread and wine, but spiritually they are the Flesh and Blood of Christ and, in this instance, we do want to become spiritually what we eat and drink.

The preaching of the Word of God always leads to a sifting of the hearts of the listeners. God draws sinners to the Saviour through the power of truth, His word. Those who reject the Word will reject the Saviour. Those who receive the word will receive the Saviour and experience the new birth, eternal life.

Do you feel your need for Christ because there is a spiritual hunger within? Are you willing to admit to that need and come to the Saviour? If you will, He will save you and satisfy you forever.