

Our Gospel reading this morning is another in a series of readings from St John's account of Jesus' "Bread of Life Discourse" that have been occupying our lectionary for the past few weeks. In my sermon last week I suggested that one way we can think of this discourse is as if Jesus were walking around the symbol of bread, at each step showing it from a different angle, at each step adding a new layer of meaning to the symbol, until by the end of his discourse bread means much, much more than the crowd first thought it meant. In last week's reading, Jesus' step around the symbol made a connection between the manna, the bread from heaven God sent to feed the Israelites in the wilderness, and himself—"I am the living bread that came down from heaven," Jesus said—and then he made a further connection between *bread* and the *teaching* that comes from God. Bread is used as a symbol for what gives life, and what really gives life, Jesus tells the crowd, is the Word and Wisdom of God that comes from heaven. Jesus quoted from the prophets, "You shall all be taught by God," and he promised that he was the one who would bring them the teaching-that-comes-from-God-to-give-life. All of that was what Jesus meant when he said "I am the living bread that comes from heaven."

That was all in last week's step around the symbol. In this week's reading, Jesus takes another step around the symbol, and in this step Jesus ups the ante considerably. Jesus says "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Jesus has been stretching the crowd's ability to understand all along; but now, with this saying, Jesus may have stretched it almost to the breaking point. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" the crowd murmurs, and they are clearly disturbed by the image. If they think Jesus is speaking literally, that means cannibalism—and in the first century Jewish imagination (not so different from our imagination today) the very thought of cannibalism is so repugnant, so disgusting, that they would want to reject it immediately, peremptorily, out of hand, sight unseen. And even if Jesus wasn't speaking literally, even if the crowd knew perfectly well that Jesus was speaking in symbolic terms—even so, the image itself was so disturbing to them that the people would have a hard time thinking Jesus could mean anything *good* by it. "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood in order to have life within you" would have seemed to the people so inherently *wrong* that it would have been very difficult for them to get past that to hear what Jesus was really trying to say.

We today might have a somewhat easier time of it, because we use this kind of language about Jesus all the time. In every celebration of Holy Eucharist, in every sharing of Holy Communion, we speak of the Body and Blood of Jesus, and how we partake of the Body and Blood when we eat the bread and wine of the sacrament. Maybe that language doesn't seem quite so shocking to us as it does to the Jewish crowd John depicts as first hearing Jesus' teaching. But I suspect that even for us, when we hear the words so baldly as we do in today's Gospel—"my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink"—even for us that graphic image seems a little difficult, kind of challenging, making us step back a bit and say "Hey wait a minute; what *is* it that Jesus is really trying to say here?"

Well, it may help to remember that this image doesn't stand on its own, but is built on the images that come before—that's how Jesus' discourses in John's Gospel work. And as we've seen, Jesus has already connected the symbols of bread and heaven and teaching and Wisdom, so that "eating Jesus' bread from heaven" serves as a kind of composite symbol for "receiving Jesus' teaching that comes from God." Jesus says the Wisdom from God is what gives life, and if you receive this Wisdom, if you eat this bread, you will live. But receiving Wisdom means more than just entertaining it in our thoughts, just as eating bread means more than just putting it in our mouths. To really eat bread you have to chew it, and swallow it, and feel it go down your esophagus, and digest it, and let the nutrients from the bread enter into your bloodstream, and have your cells absorb those nutrients, and have the components of the bread

become part of the living tissues of your body. That's what being nourished by bread *is*.

And it's the same way with Wisdom: we have to hear it, and contemplate it, and ponder it, and let it become part of us, part of our mental furniture, part of the way we think, part of the way we perceive, part of the way we make decisions, part of the way we act—until Wisdom is not only a matter of the head, but a matter of the heart, and a matter of behavior, and a matter of relationships, and a matter of life. To receive Wisdom means not only to think it, but to act it. And the best example we have of this is Jesus himself. Jesus shared the teaching that comes from God not only in what he *said* and how he *talked*, but in what he *did* and how he *acted*. Jesus didn't just say "God is generous," but Jesus lived God's generosity by breaking bread and fish and feeding thousands. Jesus didn't just say "God forgives your sins," but Jesus lived God's forgiveness by forgiving the paralyzed man and setting him free to walk, and by forgiving the soldiers even as they crucified him. Jesus didn't just say "God wants you to be reconciled to him, and to be reconciled to each other," but Jesus lived God's reconciliation by opening up his table fellowship to everyone, sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and Pharisees and rich and poor and outcasts and in-groups—*everyone*. Jesus didn't just say "God loves you," but Jesus lived God's love, loving everyone around him and calling them into a community where they could learn to live each other, in the same way Jesus loved them. Heavenly Wisdom, the teaching of God that gives life, wasn't just in Jesus' mind, but was in his heart and his behavior and his relationships—Jesus' very flesh was the living instrument of God's Wisdom-Word.

And when Jesus says "If you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will have life within you," he is offering to share his embodiment of God's Wisdom with us. "Flesh" here becomes a multi-layered symbol for Jesus' way of living, for the way the Wisdom of God is given concrete and physical expression in all of Jesus' actions and decisions and thoughts and feelings. "Blood" of course is an ancient Hebrew symbol for the power of life; when Jesus speaks about his blood it becomes a symbol for the life from heaven that animates his earthly life. So to eat Jesus' flesh and drink Jesus' blood is a composite symbol for receiving the life-giving Wisdom-Word that comes from heaven and embodying it in the concrete and physical actions and decisions and thoughts and feelings that we have in our lives. Partaking of the Body and Blood means participating in the real-life actions that live out God's generosity and God's forgiveness and God's reconciliation and God's love in our everyday, down-to-earth world.

And that is what we are all about here in this Eucharist today. We take this bread and wine and bless it and break it and share it, so that by eating the bread and drinking the wine we may partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus—and we partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus so that the Wisdom of God embodied in Jesus may be embodied and active and expressed in our bodies, too. Just as we eat the bread and drink the wine and it becomes part of us, so we receive the Word of God in Christ and it becomes part of the way we act in the world. When the deacon or the priest comes to you at Communion in just a few minutes, and holds up the wafer and says "The Body of Christ," we're identifying the bread, telling you what the bread is, telling you that the bread is a sign of the living presence of Jesus; but we're also identifying *you*, telling you what you are, telling you that you participate in the living presence of Jesus, so that you may love as Jesus loves and do as Jesus does in your world, too.

Jesus said "If you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will have my eternal life in you." That imagery is disturbing, even shocking, to our ordinary sensibilities; yet for that very reason it has a power to disturb us, even shock us, in extraordinary understanding and action and grace in Jesus' Name. May it be for each of us today, as we come forward to this communion rail, that we may hear the voice of Jesus himself say to us "The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven; the Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation." Amen.