

SPG#213, Pentecost 11B, Proper 15

August 16, 2009

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

We in the Church are accustomed to referring to the words of Jesus in our liturgies and in our lives. Every Sunday, and perhaps even more often than that, we repeat his words that make up the Lord's Prayer. Often we quote him when he speaks of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. We quote him often in the words of the beatitudes when he said, **Blessed are the peacemakers and the merciful and the pure in heart,** and so on. We are fond of remembering when he said, **No longer do I call you servants. For the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends.** In the funeral liturgy, one of the scripture readings which can be used has him saying, **I go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am, there you may be also.**

We are fond of repeating his comforting words, **Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.**

And even though we like to repeat his comfortable words often in church and to ourselves, there are many things he said that tend to mystify us. Like when he said, **I and the Father are one.** Or when he said, **Before Abraham was I am.**

And finally there are times when his words are very graphic and earthy. And that is the case in today's gospel from John when he says, **Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 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.**

Even for those of us who are used to the rhythm of communion, "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven," and "The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation," his words today almost seem too graphic. We may recall when he made mud out of dirt and his own saliva to put on the blind man's eyes. In these times when Jesus is so graphic, it may be easy to be repulsed and disgusted. And we may chalk it up to one more thing he said that is recorded but not often repeated. Although we might remember in the Prayer Book what we say at the end of the Rite 1 Communion in the Prayer of Humble Access: ".....Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us." Jesus' first century listeners struggled with words like this also. In the verses following today's gospel reading we find that many following him stopped following him when they heard him say this.

I think it is helpful to reflect on what other scholars have said about these words to get a perspective. Gail R. O'Day says in her commentary on the gospel of John that the words "flesh and blood" refer back a few verses when Jesus refers to himself as the "bread of life." O'Day first says the reference to flesh and blood is one more underlining of the incarnation. In other words, when Jesus became human, it really was the Word becoming flesh and blood. The Word of God became human in the fullest sense: becoming human in the flesh, in meat, and becoming human in all bodily fluids, of which blood is the most prominent. In the second place O'Day says there is unmistakable reference to the Eucharist, to the partaking of the body and blood of Jesus that brings eternal life.

In the verses following today's gospel reading, after many followers of Jesus had left because of what he said, he turns to the twelve and asks them, **Do you also wish to leave?** Peter then answers and says, **To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.**

So, in the early church, before there were denominations participating in the communion was seen as life giving. **You have the words of eternal life.** In those days worship was in homes. There was usually an altar of some type with bread and wine, candles, a chair for the presider to sit in, and some type of seating for the congregation. There were prayers or collects, scripture, hymns, a sermon. Then there was the meal, the communion, the Eucharist. The model, or the blueprint for that communion came out of the account of the Last Supper. As you can see, the Episcopal Church has tried to preserve that balance between words and communion in its worship.

Another commentator, Arthur Gossip, points to the contrast between physical and spiritual where participating in a physical act, eating, brings eternal life.

After we have consulted scholars and other opinions about these words of Jesus in today's gospel, we are left then to wrestle with it ourselves. And today's reading is quintessential Jesus. On one level participation in Jesus Christ is simple like a child. And when times are hard, we can place our hand in his as he leads us through. And on that level he is the friend who is always there, the companion who always understands, the one who always accepts us as we are.

And yet, on another level, when he was born, he was just a baby, but sent as a child to be the Savior of the world. He is as human as any of us. Yet he is God. He is always a friend. But he is not just a friend. He walked the earth in the first century. Yet we can know him now. Believing in him opens a door. And yet we are called beyond mere believing. We can subscribe to his life in the words of the Nicene Creed. And yet, beyond subscribing, we can participate in him through the body and blood of the Eucharist.

In Jesus Christ there is always comfort, love, and acceptance. And yet spiritually in him there is always somewhere new to go.

I believe some of our difficulties in the Church at large have to do with us trying to make him less than he is. I believe that too often we try to shove him into one cubbyhole or another. Often we try to sentimentalize him into some kind of soap opera figure. And when we do we try to confine him into one role. And yet as much as he is a friend, a companion, he is Almighty God.

For us to accept him as he is, it requires an openness of heart and mind. It requires our willingness toward a wider and deeper spirituality. And if we are that open, then we can still place our hand in his on a hard day.

The question is, are we able to do both?

For that is what is required of us in our new and anxious world filled with terrorism, natural disasters, recession, hunger, disease, and war. The widening and deepening of our lives in Christ opens the door to deal with anything that seems impossible. The Apostle Paul said, **I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.**

So, let us be about being more in Christ. Let us be about enjoying him as friend. But let us also have our hearts and minds open for what is new in Christ. Let us be about believing. But let us also be about eating and drinking. And through it all we will know that he is there for us. And we will know that he has the words of eternal life. Amen.