



THE LECTERN
HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

UNDERSTANDING CHRIST'S HARD WORDS

"EAT MY FLESH"

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4. "THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN" Rev. Lance R. Shilton
5. "EAT MY FLESH" Rev. Anthony G. Tress
6. "WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?" Rev. Philip H. F. Thomas

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CHRIST'S HARD WORDS

"EAT MY FLESH"

The Reverend Anthony G. Tress, Th.L.

The hard words which form the subject of this study are found in John 6, Verses 51-58 - "'I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.' The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever!'" (R.S.V.)

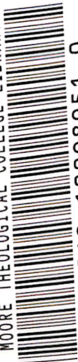
Let us take particular note of Verses 53 & 54. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Some of you will be familiar with these words already so they will come as no surprise, but to those of you who are not familiar with them, they will probably seem shocking - or even crude and distasteful.

I can almost hear someone say, "What is all this talk about eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood? What are we supposed to be - cannibals or something?" It is not surprising that we should react this way, because even Jesus' disciples found these words hard to take. They said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" Certainly these words are so startling that an explanation is demanded.

1. First of all, we will look at the context in which Jesus' statement is set. To those of us who are familiar with Christian terminology, it may come as a surprise that these words were not

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spoken in the context of discussion about the Lord's Supper. Rather, they occur in a discourse which followed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

Let us spend a moment looking at the structure of John 6, up to Verse 59, and you will see what I am getting at.

In Verses 1-14 we have the miracle in which Jesus feeds the five thousand. John describes this as a SIGN. In other words, it was not an end in itself; it pointed to Christ's true identity as the spiritual Messiah - the One Who came to satisfy their deepest spiritual hunger. However, the crowds were obsessed by the wonder of the miracle and missed its true significance.

So in Verse 15 we find the crowd trying to set Him up as a king. To their minds one who could cure people and feed people was an ideal king, but obviously Jesus could have no part of it. His kingship was of a different type.

Verses 16-21 speak of His return to Capernaum on the other side of the lake, and Verses 22-24 show how the crowds followed Him on the next day. Then in Verses 25-59 we have this most important discourse between Jesus and the Jews, which arises directly out of the miracle of the previous day. In the discussion Jesus draws out the real significance of the miracle, and it is here that our hard words occur.

2. The Discourse (Verses 25-29). Having looked at the context, let us now look at the discourse more closely.

(a) To start with, Jesus uncovered their wrong motives: "Truly, truly, I say to you; you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (Verse 26). The only reason they followed Him was that their stomachs had been filled. So they were told, "Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life which the Son of man will give to you."

(b) The Jews responded to this by demanding a sign like the sign which, they said, had been given by Moses when he fed the Israelites with manna. Jesus, of course, refused to comply and proceeded to demolish their argument with three well-directed blows:-

(1. It was not Moses who fed the Israelites with manna; it

was God, the Father.

(2. The manna was not the true bread from heaven anyway - those who ate it hungered again.

(3. But "My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (Verses 32b,33).

(c) Having annihilated the Jews' argument, Jesus now makes one of His great "I AM" pronouncements: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." In other words He equates Himself with the true bread from heaven which gives life to the world.

(d) The Jews, predictably, react with strong disappointment: "The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, 'I am the bread which came down from heaven.' They said, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?' Jesus answered them, 'Do not murmur among yourselves.'"

So Jesus reiterates: "'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.' The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" You will note that Jesus foreshadows His death: "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Verse 51).

(e) Then as the Jews continue to argue the point, the next statement follows on quite logically: "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day'." (Verses 53,54).

So we can trace a progression of thought in this discourse:

- * do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life (Verse 27);
- * the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and

gives life to the world (Verse 33);

* I am the bread of life; if anyone eats of this bread he will live forever (Verse 51);

* the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh (Verse 51);

* THEREFORE, Verses 53,54: "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day'." When we see Jesus' statement as a part of a whole progression of thought, we will realize that it has nothing to do with cannibalism, but it follows on from Jesus' own description of Himself as the Bread of Life. If Jesus metaphorically describes Himself as the bread which gives eternal life, our response to Him in the terms of the metaphor must be to partake; to eat. But Christ is the Bread of Life for us because of His death - not apart from it.

3. How, then, do we eat Christ's flesh and drink His blood?

Many will quickly reply, "At the Lord's Supper". But what does John 6 say? The answer to this can best be seen by comparing two groups of Verses. Firstly, in Verses 40 & 47 we have these statements: "For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life." "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life."

But secondly, in Verses 53 & 54 we have this: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." So in the one discourse He says, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life" and "He who eats Christ's flesh and drinks His blood has eternal life."

Are these two ways of receiving eternal life? Of course not! The two statements are saying exactly the same thing. To believe in Christ - to place one's entire confidence in Him, is to "eat His flesh and to drink His blood".

This view was shared by the Reformers, for if you look at the Rubrics at the end of the Prayer Book service for the Communion of the Sick, you will see the procedure to be adopted in case of a person who for some good reason cannot receive the Sacrament: "The Curate shall instruct him that if he do truly repent him of

his sins, and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ suffered death upon the cross for him, and shed His blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving Him hearty thanks therefore; he doth eat and drink the body and blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth."

To repent and trust Christ is to eat His flesh and to drink His blood. Have we responded to Him in this way? The bread of life has been given for us. Have we eaten? If not, Jesus says, "You have no life in you". You are spiritually dead.

4. Finally, what is the relationship between the idea of eating Christ's flesh and the Lord's Supper?

(1) Firstly, it must be said that Christ was not actually speaking about the Lord's Supper in this discourse. At this stage of His ministry the Lord's Supper had not been instituted.

(2) Secondly, we see that in this discussion Christ speaks of a spiritual reality, and this reality is everlasting life received through faith.

(3) However, thirdly, at a later point in His ministry, Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as an outward sign pointing to the same reality. Matthew's account of the institution is as follows: "Now as they were eating Jesus took bread and blessed it, broke it and gave it to His disciples and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body'. And He took a cup and when He had given thanks He gave it to them saying, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is My blood of the Covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'." (Matt. 26:26-28).

He took the bread and said, "This is my body", i.e., this represents My body - take, eat! He took the cup and said, "This represents My blood - drink of it". It was something outward and visible, but what more appropriate way could there be of picturing the spiritual truth of John 6?

(4) The purpose of the outward sign is to stimulate faith. The reality would have stood had there been no outward sign - but the sign was added to help us to exercise faith in Christ. Not only does God's Word fall upon our ears, but the truth of the Gospel is even pictured before our eyes.

(5) And so the outward sign can become an effective sign - if we approach it in faith it can become the means by which we receive the reality. True, you can have the reality with the sign, but equally truly the sign can help us to receive the reality. You remember the familiar words used by the minister as he distributes the bread in our Communion Service: "Take and eat this" This is the outward sign. "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee" - the outward sign pictures Christ's death and reminds us that it was for us.".....and feed on Him in thy heart by faith" Here is the response of faith to Christ Who died for us. The outward can remind us of the truth of the Gospel and so arouse faith - and when this is so it becomes an effective sign which helps us truly to feed on Him.

So there is a definite connection between John 6 and the Lord's Supper, but we must interpret the Lord's Supper in terms of John 6, and not the reverse. And obviously Jesus' words in John 6 caused a division among His hearers, for in Verse 66 John says, "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." So Jesus challenged the disciples as to their response. "Jesus said to the twelve, 'Will you also go away?'" But Peter's answer is quite definite: "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"

Jesus has the words of eternal life, and His words still come to us today. Let us so feed on Him by faith that we may have the reality of eternal life.

A PRAYER

ALMIGHTY GOD, who hast given to thy people the true Bread from heaven, even thy Son Jesus Christ: Grant that our souls may be so fed by him who giveth life unto the world, that we may be made strong for thy service, and share with others that which we have so richly received; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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