

Christ at the Table

John 6:47-58

He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. That's the good news that we celebrate all year long, but especially at Christmas season. We rejoice that God came to be with us, to share in our poverty and helplessness and suffering, to die on a cross that our sins might be forgiven, and so that we might live with Him forever. And so it is with joy of heart that we approach the Lord's Table to receive the free gift of salvation. We've opened up all the other presents this Christmas season, so why not one more? God came to be with us – isn't that good news?

It is, but not for everyone. For at the end of this passage, we learn that many of those who had been following Jesus went back, and followed him no more.

Now, this was partly because Jesus refused to meet their materialistic expectations. After all, this passage follows hard on the heels of Jesus' miraculous healing of the five thousand. The people who experienced this miracle wanted Jesus to repeat it, to keep on feeding them with physical food. They even wanted to seize Him and make Him their king.

Now, we know better than that. We know from today's passage that Jesus is promising us something much greater than physical food. After all, no matter how much we may have eaten over this holiday season, and no matter how many pounds we may have gained as a result, we'll get hungry again.

But it wasn't Jesus' refusal to provide their material needs that seems to have been most offputting to His disciples. For it wasn't until after He started talking about how they needed to eat His flesh and drink His blood that many of them stopped following Him.

Well, what about us? We've heard these admittedly shocking words and we're still here. In fact, we celebrate Jesus' teaching that He is the true Bread of Heaven today when we come to this table. Although we know that these elements of bread and the fruit of the vine don't physically change into His body and blood, we rejoice that Jesus is spiritually present here. We look forward to spiritual communion with Him. We rejoice at the idea of drawing close to Christ, even as Mary and Joseph and the shepherds drew close to the Babe in the manger.

But closeness isn't really what Jesus is promising, is it? No, in this passage, Jesus isn't just promising to be God with us, to be nearby to soothe our sorrows and calm our fears, to be close at hand to deal with whatever calamities come our way. He isn't just promising to be our rock of safety, our refuge, our fortress, our deliverer. No, He isn't just promising to be God with us, but God in us.

For that's what happens at the Lord's Supper, isn't it? When we take the bread, in which Christ's body is spiritually present, where does it go? Inside of us. When we take the cup, in which Christ's blood is spiritually present, where does the fruit of the vine go? Inside of us. We are, in a very real sense, living out what Jesus said in verse 56: "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him."

Now, again, we don't find that offputting for the same reason that so many of His early followers did. We know that Jesus isn't calling us to engage in cannibalism. But are we really interested in this level of intimacy with Him? Do we really want Jesus to be not just with us but inside of us?

For what would happen if that really were the case? What if Jesus really were living His life inside of us? Wouldn't we start sharing His priorities? Wouldn't we make the kind of choices that He made?

Think back to that first Christmas that we celebrate at this time of year. Are any of us really interested in that level of humility? Are we ready to give up our pride, embracing the company of those on the bottom of society's ladder – people like shepherds on the nightshift? Are we ready to give up our comfort, willing to spend a night in a stable instead of in a warm bed? Are we ready to give up whatever semblance of control we have over our lives and travel long distances to fill out tax forms and then become refugees from a hostile government that wants to kill us?

And are we ready to go through all this discomfort, all this pain for others? Are we ready to offer ourselves to God, all that we are and all that we have, heart, soul, mind, and strength, holding nothing back? That's what Jesus did, because that's who Jesus is. In fact, as verse 57 says, that's who the Father is too. The God whom we claim to worship was willing to give up His best to save a world full of ungrateful sinners. He thought that saving His enemies was more important than the life of His own Son. Is that the kind of God we want to have inside of us? Is that the kind of life we want to live, a life of radical humility, a life of radical love?

No, perhaps it's no wonder that so many of Jesus' followers left Him after He spoke the words of today's passage. They were willing to sign on for the power and the glory that came from being around Jesus, for the free meals and the healing that came with having Him close by. But they didn't really want Him to invade their lives, to root up all their priorities, to shake up all their expectations, to change every part of them from the inside out. It's no wonder they went away disappointed – they didn't really want to eat His flesh and drink His blood.

And if we think again about the Christmas story, they weren't the first to have this sort of disappointment, were they? Yes, it was out of the desperation of poverty that Mary and Joseph laid the baby Jesus in a manger, a feedbox for animals. But that meant that any of the cows or sheep or donkeys who came to that manger that night would also have gone away disappointed – they couldn't eat a baby – they wanted hay.

As you come to this table today, and all who have been baptized and have made a public profession of faith in Christ are welcome, will you also go away disappointed? You will if you are looking for anything of any worldly good – a tiny cracker and a sip of juice won't satisfy any material craving you may have. If that's all you think this sacrament is, if you don't understand the meaning of this meal, you'd better not come. And if you are still clinging to your sin instead of Christ, if you don't really want Him to change you from the inside out, you'd better not come.

But if you want Christ to live inside you in all His fullness, He is here for you. If you want your life to be turned upside down, to be remade into the very likeness of Christ, in all His humility, in all His self-sacrificial, unconditional love, you will find Him here. Come to the table and receive the bread of life, offered for all who believe on, who believe into Him. Come to Christ and be filled.