

Gnawing On Jesus

What does it mean to be Christian?

Our evangelical friends say: accept Jesus as your savior, and you are saved!

Our Pentecostal friends say: get bathed in the Holy Spirit, and you will be saved!

And we in the liturgical and orthodox tradition, say: show up each Sunday, receive Holy Communion, and you are saved!

But it seems that John's gospel is saying to all of us: not so fast!

We are in the fourth of five Sundays as John's gospel mulls over and over, almost like kneading dough, this sense, this mystery, of Jesus as the bread of life....which may be why your eyes are starting to glaze over: because of all the repetition, except today maybe you're also feeling a little queasy, since today's gospel, taken literally, sure sounds like an advertisement for cannibalism!

Eat my flesh!

Drink my blood!

It's one thing to talk about Jesus as bread....but Jesus as dinner?!

This grisly image is far removed from simply welcoming Jesus into your heart; it's far removed from the ecstasy of speaking in tongues, or the predictable pace of our Sunday Mass.

And if you know your Greek, and I know you ALL know your Greek, you also know that the word Jesus uses today for "eat" is not about fine dining with three different forks and lace napkins.

The word he uses means..... to "gnaw."

Like a dog on a bone.

Perhaps Jesus is telling us that if we really want to follow him, and not simply admire him, it's not enough to welcome him into our hearts, it's not enough to get stirred up with emotion, it's not enough to take even the bread and cup week in and week out.

Instead, he seems to be saying, if you want to follow me....sink your teeth into me.

Sinking your teeth into me allows you to change your mind about what is important in life, and then to let go your need for power or security or fear of loss.

Sinking your teeth into me allows you to come back to God's vision for this beautiful world; to muster the courage to confront predator priests and presidents who lack even a modicum of basic human decency.

Sinking your teeth into me allows you to find the courage to leave an abusive relationship.

It changes a detached and intellectual faith into a faith that shapes how we live and love and act in this world.

A group of Polish Christians gathered about ten years after the end of World War II to decide whether to accept an offer made by some Germans to come to Poland, to express their deep sorrow for the horrors inflicted by the Nazis.

A Polish man stands up, saying:

"Never!"

"Some crimes are simply unforgivable!"

At the end of the meeting, the group stands, joins hands, and prays the Our Father.

When they reach the part of the prayer....“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us....” the man stops the prayer in mid-sentence.

“I was wrong, of course we must forgive....” J. Forrest, Love Your Enemies.

Gnawing on Jesus allows the pain of grief and resentment to give way to forgiveness....

She was only 38 when the diagnosis of terminal illness came.

For a few months, there was rage and despair at the unfairness of it all.

Four young children still needing to be raised.

A husband to love.

A new career just beginning in a field she adored.

How could God do this to her?

To them?

But as the months passed, and the diagnosis did not change, she began to change how she saw the diagnosis.

It slowly became an entry way into the suffering of so many others – when it used to be easy to say “I know how you feel,” now she really did know.

And it became an entry way into God; a faith that had been strong before, now took on deep mystery, profound insight, and a glow that is usually reserved for pregnant women.

In a sense, she was pregnant, not with a child, but with an expectation that she was moving, sooner than she wished, but moving nevertheless, into the far country where God may be known face to face.

She came to see in the cancer that was invading every part of her body, the very life-force of God.

When she died that February morning, with a loud groan and a great exhaling of air, it was as if her spirit filled the whole house, before moving upward and outward into the great mystery that awaits us all.

Gnawing on Jesus took her from places of deep despair and inconsolable anguish into the highest heavens of hope.

A priest spends a year among the Masai people in Kenya, teaching them about the Christian faith, hoping to baptize some of them.

When the year is complete, the priest announces that some will be baptized, those who came regularly to the class, those who seem to understand, those who seem on the ball....

Others, the lazy or stupid, they will not be baptized.

The elder stops the priest.

"Padri, I say this with great respect, why are you trying to break us up?"

"For one whole year, we have talked about these things around the fire, when you were not here.

Yes, there have been lazy ones, but they have been helped by those with much energy.

There are stupid ones, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent.

Yes, there are those with little faith, but they have been helped by those with great faith.

Would you drive off the lazy ones and those with little faith and the stupid ones?

From the first day, I have spoken for these people, and I speak for them now.

On this day, I declare for this community, that we have reached that step in our lives where we can say:

'We believe.'" V. Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered, 70.

As gnawing on Jesus gathers disparate individuals into a community of faith, where my lack is filled by your abundance.

To gnaw on Jesus is to ask, with Nicodemus, "how can an old man be born again?"

To gnaw on Jesus is to wonder, with the woman at the well, "how can it be that the water you give cures thirst forever?"

To gnaw on Jesus is to see that everything exists within and through and because of the Living God.

It is to understand that God doesn't live in our hearts; but that we live in the heart of God.

“Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me,” Jesus tells us today.

And because we really do live and breath and have our being in God, we can let go.

Not because life will suddenly become a bed of roses.

It won't, because the way that Jesus gives us his flesh is on the cross; making holy every heartbreak, every tragedy, every death that ever was and that ever will be.

Instead of avoiding or trying to control the pain that comes our way in life, the depths that John's gospel takes us to is this: it is in your pain, in your darkest moments, that you are most securely held in the palm of the hand of She who made you; of He who calls you tenderly by name.

It is in the cracking open that we are brought to life.

It is in that place where we most authentically meet, drink, and consume Jesus.

This is a far cry from the popular values of the world today: the values of fame, power and money.

Yet it is from those misleading and ultimately death-dealing values that Jesus comes to liberate us.

So what does it mean to be a Christian?

Gnaw on Jesus, my friends, gnaw on Jesus!

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