

Meaning behind the offer to eat and drink Christ's body and blood
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RITE & REASON: “THIS IS a hard saying . . .” This response, elicited in the context of John 6:51-9, marked the parting of the ways for many. But some disciples, already affected by the contagion of Jesus, decided to continue following him: they trusted him enough to be willing to wait for some future moment in which to understand the strange offer of his flesh to eat.

What is it, then, that makes this a hard saying? It has to do with the extent to which it evades being read either metaphorically or symbolically. Many scholars have drawn attention to the sheer physicality of the language here; Raymond Brown in *The Gospel According to St John* pointed out that “the Fourth Gospel makes no concession to Jewish sensibilities and insists stubbornly on the reality of the flesh and the blood” (page 283).

As far back as we can go, the Christian movement is understood to be a missionary movement. It assumes that it has something to say – better, something to be lived out – that is humanly attractive across all cultural boundaries.

The ancient Christian tradition of the Last Supper saw the action of Jesus in continuity with the specifically divine activity of shaping a people by covenant.

From the earliest strata of the Hebrew Bible, God is understood as forming “a people”. God responds to the cry of cruelly exploited people by shaping them into “a people”. Christian tradition introduced the term ‘covenant’ into the narrative to acknowledge this uniquely divine activity as emanating from Jesus.

It is in and through experiencing his reconstruction of our humanity that we come to know who Jesus is. The experience of being enabled to realise our humanity in previously unimaginable ways is integral to faith's recognition of Jesus.

Underlying Paul's discussion of the Body in 1 Corinthians and elaborated in the closing chapters of Romans is his conviction that the relation of Christians to each other is one of "building up": we are involved in Christ in constructing each other's humanity. It helps to connect this with John 13.

Here we are told that to grow into Jesus's 'Lordship' is to become able to wash one another's feet, that is, to welcome them as guests at the same table.

The New Testament, in speaking of the new creation, the new covenant in his blood, does not encourage us to think of this as being in simple continuity with the world as we have made it. On the contrary, the world as we have made it reacts with murderous violence to Jesus's invitation to welcome the future God is bringing to God's world and to the people God loves (Luke 4:28-9).

It would appear then that to grasp the event of Jesus as an act of God, the community must first understand its distinctiveness and separateness. Not, of course, separateness from the human race: that would miss the point.

Separateness, rather, from all communities and kinships whose limits fall short of the human race. This new way of realising our humanity is based on no pre-existing social structures but on sheer humanity, common creatureliness, our common capacity to grow into the likeness of Christ.

Even though we habitually think of the Eucharist in relation to the Last Supper, there is, in fact, a wider Eucharistic theme that is coextensive with the whole Gospel account of the flesh and blood way of being human enacted by Jesus in our world.

This theme of the Eucharistic Way of Jesus refers to his practice of welcoming all that God has let be as gift, and giving thanks for it. He gives thanks for the others; they are gift to him.

Challenged to a deeper humanity, to a level of relating that is inclusive of every scrap of the human, we easily become resentful, angry, dangerous. But since the challenge arises only through the experience of an immense love, we may yet be enabled to respond with Jesus's own words: "my flesh for the life of the world".

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