

## Eating the Flesh and Drinking the Blood of the Son of Man

**Summary:** the original “hard saying—all four evangelists—Mark’s lesson—the manna—“My flesh”—a natural question—not taken literally—Augustine of Hippo—Bernard of Clairvaux—connection to the communion feast—summed up.

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*“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” (John 6:53)*

This was the original hard saying: as John reports, “many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’” (John 6:60). The implication is that they not only found it difficult to understand, but suspected that, if they did understand it, they would find it unacceptable. The New English Bible (NEB) expresses a different nuance by its rendering: “This is more than we can stomach! Why listen to such talk?” That implies that they thought Jesus was talking nonsense, and that it was a waste of time listening to it. But that is probably not what John means.

The feeding of the five thousand is one of the few incidents in the ministry of Jesus recorded by all four evangelists. The narrative of Mark 6:31-52 (including the sequel in which Jesus came walking to his disciples across the water) is reproduced substantially in Matthew 14:13-33 and (without the walking on the water) in Luke 9:10-17. John tells the story independently (together with the walking on the water) in John 6:1-21.

In the synoptic Gospels we get the impression that there was more in the feeding of the multitude than met the eye at the time or meets the reader’s eye today. Mark in particular makes it plain that the feeding was intended to teach the disciples a lesson which they failed to learn, and that Jesus was surprised at their failure. When Jesus had joined them in the boat on their way back to the other side of the lake of Galilee, and the strong headwind which had made progress so difficult for them, had stopped blowing, then, says Mark, “they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:51-52). “Their hearts were hardened” means “their minds were closed,” as the NEB puts it: they were too obtuse to take the lesson in, and the lesson evidently had something to do with the person of their Master.

But the further meaning which lies beneath the surface of the synoptic record is brought to the surface by John and spelt out in detail. He does

this in the form of an address given by Jesus shortly afterwards in the synagogue at Capernaum. The subject of the discourse is the bread of life. It has been suggested that on that sabbath day one of the scripture lessons in the synagogue was Exodus 16:13-36 or Numbers 11:4-9, which tell of the manna, the bread from heaven with which the Israelites were fed during their wilderness wanderings. At any rate, this is the subject with which the address begins.

The manna which their ancestors ate in the wilderness, Jesus tells his hearers, was not the food of immortality: those who ate it died—some sooner, some later. Similarly, the bread with which he had recently fed the multitude was only material bread also. They wished to make him their leader because he had given them that bread, but really, he had come to give them better bread than that. Just as he had offered the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well better water than that in the well, the eternally satisfying water of life, so now he offers these Galileans better bread than the loaves with which the five thousand had been fed, better bread even than the manna which their forefathers had eaten, "the food which endures to eternal life."

The manna might be called bread from heaven, even the bread of God, but the true "bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:27-34). Not only so, but God has one authorised and certified agent to bestow this life-giving bread—that is the Son of man, Jesus himself. So far, so good. As the Samaritan woman, hearing of the water of life, said, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst" (John 4:15), so now Jesus's present hearers say, "Sir, give us this bread always."

This sets the stage for the next step of the lesson. Jesus not only gives the bread of life; he is the bread of life. True life, eternal life, is to be had in him alone: "he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). Indeed, not only will those who come to him in faith find in him perpetual sustenance and refreshment for their soul's hunger and thirst; they will never die. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven, anyone who eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51).

Now the lesson really begins to be hard. Anyone who has the advantage of reading these words in the context of the whole Gospel of John knows what their purport is. To believe in Christ is not only to give credence to what he says, but it is to be united to him by faith, to participate in his life.

Up to a point, his words about giving his flesh for the life of the world are paralleled in Mark 10:45, where he speaks of the Son of man as coming "to give his life a ransom for many." In the language which Jesus spoke

“my flesh” could be another way of saying “myself”—he himself is the bread given for the life of the world. But the saying in Mark 10:45 makes no reference to the Son of man as food for the souls of the “many.” This is an additional emphasis, and one which leaves the synagogue congregation out of its depth.

For the people who felt out of their depth, it was a natural question to ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52). But it is John's practice when recording Jesus's discourses or conversations to quote words which have a spiritual meaning and then make the hearers show by their response that they have failed to grasp that meaning. Jesus is thus given an opportunity to repeat his words more fully. So here he repeats himself more fully in reply to the congregation's bewilderment: “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” (John 6:54-56).

What could he mean? Plainly his language was not to be taken literally. He was not advocating cannibalism. But how was it to be taken? It was not only obscure, they thought, it was offensive. For Jews, the drinking of any blood, even the eating of flesh from which the blood had not been completely drained, was forbidden. But drinking the blood of a human being was an idea which ought not even to be mentioned. This was a hard saying in more senses than one.

Jesus answered their protest by pointing out that his words were to be understood spiritually. “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail (John 6:63). The physical or literal meaning of the words was plainly ruled out. But what was the spiritual meaning?

Again, the reader of this Gospel, viewing these words in the context of the whole work, has an advantage over the first hearers, who had no such explanatory context. What we have in Jesus's strange language is a powerful metaphor stating that those who come to Jesus in faith, appropriate him and enter into union with him, are granted a share in the life of God.

On this let us hear two doctors of the Church. Augustine of Hippo (at the end of the fourth century) and Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century). The hard saying cannot be taken literally, says Augustine, since it would seem to be enjoining a crime or a vice. “It is therefore a figure, bidding us communicate in the sufferings of our Lord, and secretly and profitably treasure in our hearts the fact that his flesh was crucified and pierced for us.”<sup>i</sup> Elsewhere he sums the matter up in a short statement—*Crede et manducasti*, “Believe, and thou hast eaten.”<sup>ii</sup>

Bernard expounds the words “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood

has eternal life” as meaning, “He who reflects on my death, and after my example mortifies his members which are on earth, has eternal life - in other words, “If you suffer with me, you will also reign with me.”<sup>iii</sup>

The question is naturally raised: What relation do these words of Jesus bear to the communion service, in which believers receive bread and wine as tokens of the body and blood of the Lord? Since John, unlike the other evangelists, does not record the institution of the Holy Communion, it could be said that this discourse represents his counterpart to their accounts of what Jesus did and said in the upper room when he gave his disciples the bread and the cup.

In the discourse of John 6 Jesus is not making a direct reference to the Holy Communion, but this discourse conveys the same truth in words as the Holy Communion conveys in action. This truth is summed up in the invitation extended to the communicant in the *Book of Common Prayer*: “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.”

To feed on Christ in one's heart by faith with thanksgiving is to “eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood” and so have eternal life.

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<sup>i</sup> Augustine, On Christian Doctrine 3.16.

<sup>ii</sup> Augustine, Homilies on John 26.1.

<sup>iii</sup> Bernard, The Love of God 4.11.