



August 19, 2018 - How Can This Be?

Given by Rev. Mattei

The Jews might have been the first ones to be confused and about Jesus' words ([John 6:51-58](#)) but they were certainly not the last ones. I have heard the same question many times and in many versions. The last time was not too long ago. In fact...

"Not true!" was the reply when I announced: "The Body of Christ broken for you; the Blood of Christ shed for you." I was shocked and didn't know what to make of the man's response. This was on a Sunday, not too long after my arrival at Nativity. I didn't know if he were joking (bad taste) or testing my reaction. I stayed calm and moved on to the next communicant. I saw him coming to worship faithfully for several months afterward and no other challenge was issued. I kept looking for behavioral signs that would give me an insight on why he offered that line of unbelief but couldn't see any. He seemed to enjoy worshipping with every Sunday by the way he followed the readings, the prayers, the sermon and the music. He is not with us any more and I regret not asking him what he meant at the time.

My assumption is that he looked at the physical elements of bread and wine and saw in them a sign of and a reference to the life of Christ, a reminder of what Jesus meant by his words and actions, and a call to do the same. That's not an uncommon understanding. He was probably reacting to the idea that if bread and wine were real flesh and blood we would be engaging in cannibalism, an ancient accusation that spread in the Roman world at the very beginnings of Christianity. But the Christian (especially Lutheran¹) interpretation of Jesus' words about eating his body and drinking his blood is to see the real presence of Jesus "[in, with and under](#)" the elements of bread and wine. In fact, the Son of God has not come to *substitute* and do away with the physical world but to *incarnate* and become part of the world which he dearly loved. So "in, with and under" the bread and wine we *trust* the redeeming presence of Christ, the

¹ "Why then should we not much more say in the Supper, "This is my body," even though bread and body are two distinct substances, and the word "this" indicates the bread? Here, too, out of two kinds of objects a union has taken place, which I shall call a "sacramental union," because Christ's body and the bread are given to us as a sacrament. This is not a natural or personal union, as is the case with God and Christ. It is also perhaps a different union from that which the dove has with the Holy Spirit, and the flame with the angel, but it is also assuredly a sacramental union." Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 37, 299-300). See also the [Augsburg Confession, article X](#).

One who [told us](#) he is totally part of us and claims us for holy and eternal life in him ([John 6:53-54](#)).

Our intelligence and logical thinking cannot begin to explain Jesus' announcement to the Jews in Capernaum or his affirmation to his disciples during the last supper in Jerusalem that the bread was his body and the wine his blood. Any theological explanation of Jesus' real presence in the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine is a futile and fragile attempt. We cannot understand a mystery and can only receive his Word in faith. In fact, that is what Jesus requires of us: to *simply* eat his flesh (the Word incarnated: see [John 1:14](#)) and drink his blood (the sacrifice of redemption: see [John 19:34](#)) just as he asks that we *humbly* bow to wash each others' feet (see [John 13:1-17](#)). Unless we are ready and willing to eat/drink and let our feet be washed we will never take in Jesus' life ([John 6:53](#) and [John 13:8](#)) and be part of his reality.

Flesh and blood are a Hebrew idiom for the *whole person*: Jesus invites us to take him in, to chew on him so he would be in us. By so doing, through this descent into our life, our whole self is taken up in him through a holy ascent into the realm of eternal life or kingdom of God. Sacramental communion is a mutual abiding, a life of mutual presence, a reciprocal indwelling: in the Eucharist, Jesus is still communicating the life-giving mission he has received from the Father; Jesus, the sacramental bread of life, continues to give his flesh and blood; he's still blessing us with his life transforming presence and we become bread for the world.

This seems to be Jesus' mission: to feed us and fill us up with his life so that, united with him and the Father and being part of one another, we may become life (or bread or a body) for the world. It's quite interesting to consider the verbs for eating that we encounter in [John 6:51-58](#). Those who eat of the flesh of Jesus should actually devour it voraciously. It's like hearing Jesus command us to *chew* on the Word. One can't simply hear it; one must dwell on it, in it, [pay attention](#) to it, [live it out](#).

Yet, Jesus' revolting proposal to chew on his flesh, just as his humbling insistence that he wash our feet, has gloomy consequences for a disciple. Jesus is practically saying: Follow my example and let yourself be chewed up by the world. Martyrdom is not something we embrace easily, nor is something we should worry about in the West. Yet, it speaks of the fundamental Christian attitude to be totally and generously available to others as Jesus is available to us, and assume vulnerability rather than defensiveness as a way of life: the Way of Jesus is a carrier of life.

When we individually gather at the feet of Jesus and collectively receive the Word, the presence of God who speaks the Word is manifested to us through the Spirit, who

facilitates the divine communication. The unity enjoyed in Christian fellowship is made possible by the Spirit through which we are called and nourished. In that reality of Oneness we live the eternal life of Jesus as gift: we see our darkness brought to light and redeemed for glory; we see our smallness forgiven and washed in grace. Strengthened and fed on Jesus' body we are empowered to do the same.

When we approach the altar in all fervor, humility and reverence, let us pray that we may come to know more intimately the One who is offering himself to us, the One who wants to grant us eternal life in the assurance of his consistent presence in the bread of life. Let us also pray that we may be given the strength to offer ourselves as food to be chewed on, those realities where in generosity, vulnerability and humility we are asked to feed the world so that the world may come to know the Bread of Life eternal. Amen