

## Bread of Life, 3: Flesh Given for Life

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15 (20) B, August 15, 2021

Those of you who joined us to celebrate the life, and mourn the passing, of Barbara Gessford earlier this month may still, like me, have stuck in your heads the famous hymn that sets this theophagous passage of the Gospel of John to music. [Sing] “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger...” and all the rest. With neither a regular rhythm or rhyme scheme, it manages something with its melody that is difficult to do: set weird-sounding, if metaphorically vibrant, prose into a song that’s easy to sing and impossible to forget. Writing this sermon this week, I keep hearing in my head, [sing] “and I will raise him up, and I will raise him up, and I will raise him up on the last day.” I even awoke to the sound, in my head, of the lyric, and proceeded to creak my way upright wondering, if only for a moment, whether my last day might indeed have come, sight unseen upon me.

If not me, let us hope, then perhaps upon my mattress, which has seen far too many winters, but borne up proudly as the relatively young man who bought it has grown in years and girth and, one hopes, in wisdom.

But we know not the day nor the hour, as the good book says, and (as it also says) evil is sufficient to the day thereof for us to worry about what might come tomorrow. Far too many of us have lost far too many people over the past year or so to do anything more than celebrate the lives we still have, cherish them, and make the most of them, even as we grieve. A man I know – a mentor, actually – has been struggling hard to do this ever since losing his wife a year ago, after her long battle with debilitating disease. As he and I lost yet another friend and colleague this past week, he reflected to us something George Orwell once wrote, that “as your dead increase, it does rather take away the taste of things.” Life becomes less, in all the ways it can, and one begins to make one’s peace with the fact that it will end, and perhaps welcome that end as a relief. A part of him – my friend and mentor, that is – longs

to join his own dead in the undiscovered country from which no traveler returns, bereft as he is without his beloved, and consoled only to a certain degree by the joy his children and grandchildren give him, and not at all by his many accomplishments and literary legacy. He lost most of his family at places like Lodz, Treblinka, Chelmno, and whatever other places the Nazis chose to kill them in, and lost many of his comrades-in-arms, as well as his last shards of his innocence and tolerance for stupidity, whilst serving in the infantry in what the people of Viet Nam call “The American War.”

It is in this spirit that I approach today’s gospel from a slightly different direction. I simply note that everyone who heard Jesus’s words that day, or wrote them down into what has become the Gospel of John, has died. Even the one who spoke those words has died – indeed, his speaking them was part of how he got people ready for the fact that he would – in torment, out in the open, and with his momma watching. (Yes, we know that he rose, but do not minimize the horror of what he went through, or what it meant to those who watched him go through it; “by thy agony and bloody sweat,” we pray in the Great Litany, “Good Lord, deliver us.”) Where are they now, those many dead? What has become of them, the disciples, the apostles, the friends-of-the-Lord, his fellow surfers from the Sea of Galilee or the beaches off Caesarea? What grave on land or sea now holds the remains of those who asked, quite reasonably, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat, and what help would it be to us if he did?” For they are gone now, all of them, gone from this world, and none now remember their names or remain to tell, apart from this passage, their story.

*Sic transit gloria mundi*, as the saying goes in Latin: thus passes the glory of the world. Whatever Jesus meant by calling himself the bread of life, and promising that those who ate it would have eternal life, he clearly did not mean that their lives on Earth would go on forever. Giving his flesh for the life of the world did not makes any lives

in it immortal, but gave to their mortality new meaning. This is why even at the grave we make our song, “Alleluia,” praising the God who is, was, and ever shall be. Our mortality and our awareness of it are among what Tolkien once called God’s “strange gifts” to human beings. Our lives begin in time and end in time, typically without so much as our bye or leave. Once we realize we have life, however, and are aware that we will have it for a limited time only, not forever, we realize almost intuitively that the life must have a purpose, a reason, a goal. We realize this before we realize or discern what that goal is. Once we find it, we might or might not have the ability to pursue it, but we’ll know it’s there. As we mature, we see that we are each on our own journeys, to such ends as seem best to us. We must figure out what those ends are using all the gifts, needs, and desires God gave us. In one of his letters Paul names this task slightly differently: working out our salvation with fear and trembling. We heard this morning from the letter to the Ephesians a similar formulation: “Be careful then how you live, not as the unwise but as the wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil” (5:15-16).

Flesh given for the life of the world, indeed. Other translations call this task, which is the proper task of wisdom, “Redeeming the time.” Pursuing wisdom, following the Lord’s will, doing what we are called to do – all of these are equivalent to one another, specifying what it means to live as the wise do as we make the most of, and by God’s grace redeem, the time that is given to us. Today’s readings push the needle a bit further. The wise give thanks to the Lord, soberly but in song; grow up, don’t tell lies (especially to yourself), find those who know more than they do and learn from them, do no evil, do much good, “seek peace, and pursue it.” They chase not after rainbows and tilt not at windmills, pursue neither treasure on earth nor cloud-castles in the sky. They are in awe of the powers that made the world and their own

person, and will unmake them in due time. They never lose their passion for justice, their desire for peace, or their capacity for astonishment.<sup>1</sup>

Christ's flesh was given for the life of the world, and could be, since the life of the world was given to him and to us as flesh and in flesh, as and in our bodies, our earthly dwelling places and the only temples the Lord has ever had, or needs. Mortality was a strange gift to him as well, and gave the divine the chance to experience the fullness of the humanity it had made. God can know, in Christ, what turns out to be the saving grace of not-being, at least for a time. God can know, in Christ, death, which all the rest of us know all too well. But to give flesh for the life of the world is not only to die for the world, but to dedicate one's body and soul to life, to what gives life, and to what gives meaning to life. That, too, is another way of naming the task of wisdom, making the most of the time / redeeming the time, for the days are evil.

That the days are evil is a particularly easy judgment to make when its 105 degrees outside and half the world is on fire, and when humanity collectively is having trouble stamping out a pandemic caused by a virus it now has actual vaccines for. Moreover, if we do not change our ways, science (which is among the greatest of God's gifts) has been telling us for decades, we will heat the world to the point where human lives become in most places miserable, and in some places intolerable, yet the collective band plays on. What is wrong with us that we are like this? How do we redeem a time like this?

As our Lord himself said, one way to start would be to store up treasures not on earth, where moth and rust corrupt, but in heaven. Doing so requires that we disenthral ourselves, ever the first task of wisdom. Disenthraling ourselves is not easy, since it means to think somewhat against the grain, to consider others' needs and hopes as well as our own, and to accept that they are as valuable as our own. We need to do

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<sup>1</sup> The last phrase comes at the end of a key exchange in Spielberg's 2012 movie, *Lincoln*.

what Jesus and his earliest followers learned to do so well, even if later generations traded that communal spirit for worldly power in a hierarchical institution: work together joyfully for the good of all, putting their flesh on the line to stop life being a scrabbling, scratching, biting struggle in which people fought one another for every scrap of material advantage, and the devil take the hindmost. They saw salvation not as an individual ticket on the orphan train to heaven, but as a collective, communal freedom from what is worst in humanity: our selfishness, our competitiveness, our lust for power and security, and our abilities to hate and to do anything we can think of to serve ourselves, no matter whom it hurts or how. They realized, “We don’t have to live in a war of all against all, with our lives being nasty, brutal, and short – the God who made us has taken away the power of that evil and the death to which it inexorably leads.” We need, and the world needs, as much of that spirit – that Holy Spirit – as we can get.

I fear for us, we humans made but a little lower than the angels, if we don’t get it, don’t accept it, don’t collectively let that Spirit in. One of humanity’s deepest flaws is our ability to look with equanimity on the suffering of others if we believe that their suffering is key to our survival or well-being. We don’t want to die but are willing to kill to make sure we don’t. Whose flesh would we not give to spare our own? It is a painful question, and repeats at every level of human organization from the individual to the nation. That most of us would do anything we had to to ease our own suffering or that of whom we love does not always generate the sympathetic realization that everyone else on Earth would do exactly the same, and are thus in this our peers, not our enemies.

When it does, and when someone realizes the gap, the abyss, between what we should be and what we have made ourselves, it produces people like Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth, or Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha, who then try to figure out how to get the rest of us to understand the insight they’ve had. They all realized that though

each of us experiences salvation, enlightenment, disentrainment, and the like individually, unless everyone gets to do it, it doesn't amount to much. Pandemics and the climate crisis make the point all too plain: unless we're all saved from them, none of us is.

The 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John is one of humanity's magisterial attempts to express these insights. In these theophagous metaphors, Jesus is saying that "If y'all do just as I do, change your ways, live lovingly and selflessly by all the ways I say are blessings, in and awe pursue of wisdom, insight, and everything else that does not die, I'll take care of the rest, and fix it. I'll give my flesh for you and my flesh to you so that you might have life, and have it to the full. I will let my life end, let it be taken, in a manner that exposes what is worst in humanity: selfishness, weakness, avarice, cunning, political expedience, deceitfulness on throne and altar, the callous disregard for human need or suffering, bloodlust, the insidiousness of 'just following orders,' manipulation, misplaced hope, fantasies of revenge, and outright fear of the truth and of being held accountable to it. All of these will nail me to the wood of the cross, showing themselves as the murderous vanities they always have been, so that all will see, and all may understand, what they must nevermore become."

The life that does not die begins when the mind imagines it in just this way: a rejection of, and a triumph over, all that is worst in humanity. Such a life is not a life that never ends – mortality remains our 'strange gift' – but the life that does not die. It never stops being what it is, much the way a mathematical proof never stops being what it is. It always works. Living in it, we do not despair, fall with Keats's nightingale half in love with easeful death, or long to join our own dead, even as their absence takes life's joys with it. We live, instead, to redeem the time, especially when the days are evil, using the flesh and the lives we are given to do it, even to the end of the age. *Amen.*