

# Homily for Sunday, August 16, 2009

## Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

By JoAnn Taylor

<b>First Lesson</b>	<b>1 Kings 2:10-12;3:3-14</b>
<b>Psalm</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Second Lesson</b>	<b>Ephesians 5:15-20</b>
<b>Gospel</b>	<b>John 6:51-58</b>

....in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit...the holy food and drink of our life. Amen

Today's gospel reading sounds a bit like a vampire movie script with all it's talk about eating 'flesh' and drinking 'blood'. To a casual passerby overhearing part of this conversation, it would most likely cause some concern.....or would it. [pause] In our day and age it might – and I say might because many of us read books and watch movies that are far worse than what is 'literally' being discussed in this reading. However, that is our mistake – trying to understand this gospel reading according to its literal interpretation.

This gospel passage is the continuation of last week's gospel which talked about Jesus as the 'living bread from heaven'. Jesus is making references to events that are yet to come – the Last Supper – his betrayal, trial and crucifixion – and the resurrection to new life. The Last Supper is the representative sacrifice – remember Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, and offers it to his disciples with the admonition to 'do this in remembrance of me'; then he takes the cup of wine, blesses it, and offers it to them with the same words, to 'do this in remembrance of me'. When we share the Communion bread and wine, we share in the sacrifice of the one who offered himself in our place – faced the death that should have been ours – and conquered it so that we might live. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb sent by God.

Sacrifice is as old as the oldest religions. There is always the need for the test of courage, for the shedding of blood and for the initiate to face death. The old religions were tied to the earth, the moon, the elemental forces – air, water, fire and earth. Air faced the east and represented the heavens, the sky, the winds and the Sun – the source of life; Water faced the west and represented the seas, rivers and streams, lakes, and the rains that fell from the heavens; Fire faced the south and was represented by lightning, a forge, molten metal, and lava; and Earth faced to the north and represented the soil, forests and all that inhabited the lands, mortality and death. This isn't as pagan as it may sound. The early Christians simply chose to have an archangel represent each of the four elements – Air as St. Raphael, Water as St. Gabriel, Fire as St. Michael, and Earth as St. Uriel – and incorporated many of the local practices into their worship. [pause] The foundational belief was that the King was wed to the land. As long as the king was healthy and strong, the land prospered and peace reigned. If the king began to age or became frail or weak, then the land would suffer - famine and disease would strike, crops and animals would die. Every 7 years, blood was spilled on the land to ensure the health and prosperity of the kingdom. If the king was healthy and strong, a substitute of equal or similar rank was sacrificed in his place; if not, then the king was killed in a manner that would ensure that his blood was spilled upon the land to complete the ritual. Historians can actually trace this 7 year cycle back through the royal bloodlines in Europe for almost 1500 years – sacrifice is not a new idea and would have been very acceptable in Jesus' day. Think about it... even his crucifixion fits this scenario – 'crowned' King of the Jews, crucified by nailing his body to the cross instead of tying him – ensures the

blood is spilled on the land, his betrayal and 'trial' before the Sanhedrin and Pilate.....and Pontius Pilate could find no fault, but he handed Jesus over anyway – he played his part in the sacrificial cycle.

Jesus said, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven; all who eat my flesh and drink my blood will live forever'. To the Jews this was not acceptable– especially drinking blood. They believed the blood represented the life of the animal or person..... and that life belonged to God. That's why devout Jews will not eat any meat unless the blood has been totally drained from it. Genesis 9:4 states 'you will eat only the flesh [of the animal] without its life, that is, its blood'; and Deuteronomy 15:23 states 'only you shall not eat its blood'. Now they were hearing Jesus tell the people to drink his blood....and they did not understand – to them it was sacrilege. But Jesus was trying to teach them about a new covenant with God; a covenant which would be made official in the breaking of the bread at the Last Supper. Through this meal of bread and wine, God wants to feed us so that we can have life with him in heaven.

William Barclay uses a short story to illustrate this idea. A man or woman walks into a library looking for a good book to read. After a lengthy search, he/she takes down a volume of Greek mythology and begins reading. The stories fascinate and thrill, adhering to the reader and becoming part of his/her life. The reader carries what they've read within them, and feeds on the memories. If the book had remained on the shelf, it would have remained an external force in their lives, but once it was taken down and read, it became an internal force that could support and feed their mind, body and soul. So it is with the Eucharist – only by partaking of the feast can we experience the love, grace, mercy, and power of God through Jesus.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John, the author states that the flesh of Jesus was his complete humanity. He states, 'Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God.' John wants us to grasp the full humanity of Jesus and never let go – to think of Jesus as flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. He wants us to see God taking human form through Jesus..... to see him facing the same life situations, struggling with the same problems, and the same temptations. John also teaches us that every meal we eat should be treated as a sacrament. At the time John wrote this, there were many in the church who placed great importance on the Sacrament of Holy Communion – almost giving it a magical presence by implying that the church was the only place where one could share in the feast and be close to the Risen Christ and to God. [pause] While it is true that every Sacrament should be a special appointment with God, John felt that every meal – not just Communion - whether it was eaten in the humblest shack or in the richest palace, as a picnic outdoors, or in the most wretched dungeon – that every meal was a sacrament. He refused to limit the presence of Christ to the church and a liturgical service. John felt any meal could be for us the bread and wine which brings us to Christ. Many of us would agree with John – every time we go camping, fish in clear, swift-flowing streams of cold water, see the wild birds, elk, deer, antelope, etc. that flourish in our forests, and the majestic trees that clothe the mountains and plains, we experience the presence of God outside of the liturgy or church. We should also remember those who never get to experience the beauty we live in – that don't have enough to eat – that never drink cold, clean water – never see trees outside of a city park – or birds other than pigeons. They've never had yards to play in, grass to mow, or lakes to swim in. We are truly blessed to live in the state of Montana.

So what did we learn in today's gospel? 1. We learned about sacrifice and its place in religion – even Christianity – not just in pagan worship. 2. We learned that the Jews rejected the idea of drinking 'blood' and eating 'flesh' as an affront to God. 3. We learned that we should treat any meal we eat as a sacrament....as a means of meeting God through Christ. The elements of Holy Communion – the bread and the wine - represent the gifts given by God for our redemption – HIS Son as the sacrifice for our sins and the sins of the world. It is the meal of eternal life – without it we cannot live. Jesus is the 'living bread' sent down from heaven to feed us – to nourish us with the power and love of God.

The sacrifice is complete – the gifts have been given and received – our lives are secure. Thanks be to God. Amen.