

Jesus, why make it so hard?

August 23, 2009, 21st Sunday, B, John 6:60-69

All three readings are about changing old beliefs and customs: ...Joshua wants the Jews to choose between Yahweh's ways and their neighbors. ...Paul wants Christians to choose between Jesus' teachings about marriage and easy divorces: "*husbands & wives should love one other as much as they love their own bodies.*" ...John's little church was losing members because people had differing beliefs and opinions about Eucharist, eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. When Jesus asked Peter if he was leaving he said "To whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life?"

Have you ever left or felt like leaving the Catholic Church because of one of our teachings? I left for 12 years because the church wanted to control the way I lived on weekends. John says that many of Jesus' disciples went back to their old way of life and abandoned Jesus after his teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. If you look at Mass attendance over the last forty years it is evident that many of our children, family and friends have walked away for their own reasons.

For the last five weeks John's Gospel has been telling us how important it is to eat and drink Jesus' body and blood. Jesus promises that if we do we will live forever, that our physical bodies will turn to dust but the real me will never die, will live forever in a place Jesus has prepared that eye has not seen and ear has not heard.

The disciples have spent weeks, months, even years with Jesus witnessing miracles: changing water into wine; multiplying loaves & fish; walking on water; calming storms; curing the sick; driving out demons; raising the dead. You would think that after seeing miracles they would believe anything Jesus said. They were willing to make him king. But they were not willing to change old ways of believing. People don't like to change old ways. Jesus' Nazareth neighbors could only see him as a hometown boy. Most of us have forgotten that in Rome when Emperor Nero heard these stories about eating flesh and drinking blood he called Christians cannibals and fed us to the lions.

This teaching was hard 2000 years ago and is still hard today. Most of us who have not left have heard these words so many times that we take them for granted. We don't pay much attention to them. We don't stop and analyze what these words mean. Was Jesus talking about "transubstantiation" as Thomas Aquinas taught?

Jesus was a Jew so he knew what Moses about touching human flesh or blood, It made you unclean so you had to go to the temple and pay for a sacrifice to be forgiven for this sin. Why then did he choose to buck the current beliefs and make people try to accept a new, controversial concept of faith? Why Jesus? Why make it so hard?

I have three examples that will challenge us about refusing to change our way of thinking and believing. Old ways can sometimes keep us in prison.

If you put a buzzard in a pen that is 6 feet by 8 feet and is entirely open at the top, the bird, in spite of its ability to fly, will be an absolute prisoner because a buzzard always begins a flight from the ground with a run of 10 to 12 feet. Without space to run, it will not even attempt to fly, but will remain a prisoner for life in a small jail with no top.

A bat cannot take off from a level place. If it is placed on the floor or flat ground, all it can do is shuffle about helplessly until it reaches some slight elevation from which it can throw itself into the air. Then, at once, it takes off like a flash.

A bumblebee, if dropped into an open tumbler, will be there until it dies, unless it is taken out. It never sees the means of escape at the top, but persists in trying to find some way out through the sides near the bottom. It will seek a way where none exists, until it completely destroys itself.

In many ways, people are like buzzards, bats, and bumblebees. We struggle about with all our problems and frustrations, never realizing that all we have to do is look up! That's the answer, the escape route and the solution to any problem! Just look up.

For 2000 years we have questioned, discussed, argued, fought, killed one another about this teaching. When many Catholics left the church to form new denominations every new preacher came up with a new interpretation of this teaching. Even Christian fundamentalists who claim to believe every word in the Bible is the absolute literal truth claim that this one little bitty teaching was not to be taken literal. To many preachers Eucharist is just a spiritual union not something so weird no sane person could believe it. Surely Christians are not supposed to believe that we have to really eat a dead body or drink dead blood, eat a toe nail or get a transfusion?

Yet, we sit in our pews and claim that this teaching has to be taken literally or we will not live forever. There have been so many changes since Vatican II, what exactly does the Catholic Church really teach in 2009 about eating his body and drinking his blood?

We Catholics believe that we must take into our bodies and into our lives the Risen Body of the Lord Jesus Christ who appeared to his disciples for forty days and nights before he ascended to the father. We believe that everything that makes Jesus a real human being of flesh and blood and everything that makes Christ the Second Person of the Trinity is received into our bodies and our blood every time we receive Eucharist. But, do we really believe that it is a real body and real blood? A risen and glorified body and blood, a real person, who wants to come inside us so we can come inside him and become him for one another. Focus on "*becoming*" Jesus not transubstantiation or arguments about our differences. Put aside silly differences and celebrate unity in our diversity, unity in our common belief in the same Creed we all profess.