

SERMON

(Octave of All Saints)

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

JOHN vi. 47.

“ How can this Man give us His flesh to eat ? ”

Some people may think that the Jews need not have been puzzled by what Jesus had said, if they had remembered that it was His habit to teach by parables.

But was it a parable, or was it literal truth, when He spoke of giving His flesh for the life of the world? He did not give them any explanation or interpretation: on the contrary, He went on to expand what He had said in such a way that it became harder for them: they had not understood the saying about His flesh, but they must have been shocked when He spoke of drinking His blood.

We perhaps think that we understand fully when we apply the words to the Holy Eucharist; and no doubt the Eucharist rests upon the same truth. Yet it is itself a mystery: if it had been suggested to those Jews, they might reasonably have said, “ How can bread and wine be this Man’s flesh and blood ? ”

In reality, our Lord was speaking in plain

language about a simple fact, a fact which does not need explanation, and cannot be explained, because it is itself the explanation of nearly everything else. For all practical purposes we know well enough what *life* is; but if we try to explain it, we are lost in perplexity and mystery. Now our Lord was speaking about life, and revealing something about it which was not known before. He did not *explain*, and we need not try to do so: all we can do is to try to grasp more fully the truth which He made known.

There are two things that always go along with created life, namely, growth and feeding. There may be growth without life. A river grows: at its source it is a tiny streamlet, but it is joined by many other streamlets, and so increases in size. The other waters that join it are sometimes called its "feeders"; but no one would think of describing them as its "food." It is so much water; all that happens is that other quantities of water are added to it: its nature is not changed by the addition, and what is added is still nothing but water, as it was before. Another dead thing that grows is seen in the snow crystals that often show us lovely foliage: they grow in size, and in complexity too, but it is merely by addition: ice is added to ice, and is still nothing but ice. There is growth, but there is no feeding.

A plant grows in a very different way. It takes into it things that are not of its own nature, but dead stuff, and it changes them into its own likeness, and having changed them makes them part of itself. A tree does not grow large by getting many small trees added to it: it grows by feeding

on other things which are not in the least like trees. So it truly is alive: and in the same way, animals live and grow, by feeding on things which they transform into their own nature. Of course we cannot explain these things; we know the facts, though they are so familiar that we seldom trouble to think about them, and we can learn to understand many wonderful things about them. But in the long run the only explanation is that God has given to each creature a body and a nature as it has pleased Him; and to all living creatures He has given such bodies and such natures that they can grow by feeding, and cannot live without it.

The living plant feeds unconsciously; it sleeps all through its life, we may say. The animal eats and drinks, and falls asleep till it is hungry again. Man, at his lowest, takes a step higher: he eats and drinks and is merry. That is to say, he uses the things that support his bodily life for a higher purpose: he makes of them means for the support of his mental life. And going still higher, he makes all the things of the world food for his higher nature; they become to him not mere things, but objects of beauty and wonder, subjects for thought and study. And by taking them into his mind, he grows mentally. Just so, he grows morally by taking into his heart his fellow-men and their dealings with him. He is alive, bodily, mentally, morally, in so far as he takes in and transmutes the things that surround him. Evil passions, too, grow by what they feed on: the wicked heart puts an ill meaning into everything, and so supports its own wickedness. Here again we need no explanation,

but that God has made man so: that He has endowed him with thought and imagination and will and love, after His own likeness, but in such a way that these faculties can only grow by exercise on things which are also given.

The same is true of the life of religion. No kind of religion would be possible if God had not provided for it in the constitution of man's nature. The very lowest religion is not spun out of man's fancy: it is founded on his experience, experience of himself and of the world around him; yet that experience would not lead to anything that could be called religion if there were not in man's very nature the desire and the consciousness of some ability to enter into relationship with higher powers. That is to say, when God breathed into man the breath of life, He breathed into him also the power to know Him in His works, the power to have communion with Him. This power has been weakened and perverted, but not destroyed: when it is so, life, whether bodily or spiritual, has ended. It was ordained, once for all, that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that cometh out of the mouth of God."

In all this we have not gone beyond Christ's words, "The bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." *For the life of the world*: not for the life of man, not for the life of the saints alone. Whether we understand it or not, it is clear that He says that all those kinds of life of which we have spoken depend upon the giving of His *flesh*: that except for his sacrifice, *all* the life of the world would have perished. Truly He is "The Lamb that was slain from the found-

ation of the world," since the world continues **only** because He has died for sin.

But He does not say that all living creatures, animals and plants too, must feed upon His flesh. The life of the world is headed up in man; it was the sin of man only that shook the foundations of life, and the restoration of man is to bring blessing to all the creatures. "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain, waiting for the manifestation of the Sons of God."

Who, then, are the Sons of God?

They are those who live by Christ, in a special way; who eat His flesh and drink His blood, and have eternal life. The distinction between them and other men is not that they are stronger or wiser or more righteous than other men—though, indeed, they should be better—but that they have a new kind of life. As every kind of life, vegetable or animal, mental or moral, requires its own proper food, so this new life has to be maintained by its appropriate food: and like every other kind of food, this kind depends for its effectiveness on the word of God; and also, it has no effect unless it is taken, eaten, and digested. It is spiritual food, food for the spirit: taking it into the body is not truly eating or drinking it; it must be taken into the spirit.

The spiritual food by which the life of the saints is sustained and increased is the Resurrection Body of Christ. The same glorified Body, which is the justification and support of the whole universe, is given to us to be the support of our spiritual life. We take it as what it is, His body. We *see* that it is a bodily reality. By faith we accept His word,

who says, "This is My Body"; and we do not attempt to explain, but we realise that He who made all things to be what they are is still able to make them what He would have them to be. But we must not be content with believing: if the Bread of Life is to be of use to us, we must eat it, spiritually: we must make it our own. We must give the whole consent of our hearts to the will of God in this matter, and accept His assurance that our life is in Christ, and desire that His life may be reflected in us. True partaking of the life of Christ is just taking, as He does, the will of the Father to be our meat and drink. Yet again let us say that we do not need to understand how all is brought about, any more than we need to understand the mystery of common bread before we can eat it with profit.

There are some who say that we can spiritually feed on Christ without partaking of the visible elements. It is perhaps impossible to prove that this cannot be done; but we remember Christ's word, "Why call ye Me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" "Not bread alone, but also wine." We drink the blood of Christ: what is that, spiritually? His blood was poured out for the remission of sin, and He offers it on our behalf before the Throne on high. To partake of it is to accept that sacrifice as the only ground of our standing with God: to agree, from the heart, not in the mind only, with the judgment of God against our sin. Wine is a symbol of joy; we are to be glad, not that we have sinned, but that our justification is not from our merits but from the free love of God in Christ.

Furthermore, the Christ whom we receive is not only living, but acting; and we take part in His actions, in the breaking of the Bread, in the speaking of the words of consecration, in the prayers and intercessions which He offers in His thanksgiving to the Father; and at this time we say specially, in His remembrance of His departed saints. It is hardly a figure of speech to say that this is truly feeding upon Him, taking Him in all His activity, into our own being; it is far more than imitating Him, it is far more than associating with Him, it is far more than worshipping Him. There is no word to express it more accurately than His own words, eating and drinking: if we try to explain it by other words, we are conscious that we must leave out something of its deep meaning.

There is another point worth noticing, as bringing to light the accuracy of our Lord's saying: that is, showing that His words are not merely true, but an exact statement of the truth. We cannot be always celebrating the Eucharist; not only because there are other things that we are in duty bound to attend to, not only because of the weakness of mortal flesh, but also because it is the law of the Church, confirmed by Apostles, that the Sacrament may not be received twice in one day. And this only makes it more clear that is a matter of real and true feeding. For it is exactly the same with our bodily eating and drinking: we eat a meal, and in the strength of that meal we go on living and working till it is time for the next. Nor do we spend the interval in thinking about the food we have received; we are not always taking pains to make sure that it will do us good as it was in-

tended, though certainly, if we are wise, we will be careful to avoid anything that will hinder it from having its due effect. In short, we have faith in the nature of food and in the constitution of our bodies; or, more truly, we have faith in God's provision for our needs, and we leave it to Him to see that all goes well. So also we have received, and taken the heavenly food, and we go about our daily business in full confidence that we are living and will live by it: not because we understand how it works, but because God has spoken, and the thing will come to pass. Only, we can hinder the working of His command by returning to the love of sin.

In particular, we cannot be always thinking about the blessed dead whom we have commemorated. We cannot, and if we could, it would be a hindrance to other duties, and perhaps a temptation to seek unlawful communication with them. But the holy communion with them, in Christ, has become part of our life: and they, we cannot doubt, have received something through communion with us. So we and they continue to grow in spirit by the life of Christ. They rest from their labours, and their works, which are indeed the works of Christ, do follow them: we are still in the midst of labour and temptation; and before us all is the hope of being found in the perfect likeness of Christ when He appears.

We cannot fully answer the question "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" But we are sure that He does, and that His doing so is the crown of all that He has been doing since the beginning of creation.