

Food for Nomads (4)
John 6:51-60
October 25, 2020

It's not often that movies begin at the end of the story and work back chronologically. One I can think of is *Memento*. It brilliantly uses the reverse order of scenes to create unique tension and wonder about who the character is, why he is doing what he's doing, and whether or not the characters involved in his story can be trusted.

If we apply that to this John discourse on the bread from heaven, we might find it illuminating. In the passage following our reading today, (vs 52 ff) we understandably find the Jews dumbstruck by Jesus' claims. What we're not expecting, (vs 60ff) is a similar response from his followers. But in fact they too are sceptical and even find his teaching offensive. From that point on many of the followers left the fellowship. When the remaining disciples are asked if they are leaving also, Peter responds: *Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*. That's how it ends, so let's back up and see how we reached that point. What is so demanding about Jesus' teaching that causes this radical decision to leave?

For the past weeks we have been exploring the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. We have framed our discussion around the theme of spiritual nomads and the food they require for their journey. These Christians have been disillusioned, both with conventional religion, and with materialism. They are spiritual seekers, whether they have occupied a pew in church for decades, or have recently been drawn into a community of faith. So, nomads are on a journey and are people who have felt a strange, almost magnetic attraction to Christ.

Today we arrive at the heart of the matter. In these verses, he offers to us his own flesh and blood, the flesh which will be stretched upon the cross for our sake, and the blood which will flow freely from his dying body. This is a Hebrew idiom referring to the whole person, heart, mind, and spirit. In Jesus, you see, God meets us to love, redeem, and sustain us. The intimacy between Jesus and us is found in these images: Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep; he is the vine and we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in

him. In the bread from heaven, however, the power of the union with us is extraordinary. Jesus is inextricably bound to us, no matter what!

I suppose you could say that we spiritual nomads are like Abraham who left his family, his home, and business to follow God's call into an unknown land. It was a call to leave everything familiar, not knowing his destination. We too began our journey with lots of questions, and we brought with us Scripture, prayer, meditation, small group study, and a spiritual community who encourage us on the journey. In this community, through worship, teaching, hospitality and service, we grow in our faith. The reality is that we had to leave behind many of our prejudices, and indeed our worldview, when we set out in faith. Our hearts, our life circumstances, perhaps even our inner disquiet, made it impossible for us to stay rooted in our former life.

John began the chapter with the feeding of the five thousand. What follows is a homily on the Bread of Life, quite possibly delivered by Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum. We need to remind ourselves that John is addressing issues facing his own community toward the end of the 1st century. An alive issue was conflict with the Jewish synagogue and possibly also the Lord's Supper. So, it is not pressing it too far to suggest that this extended discourse is John's attempt to strengthen his community against the threats of the synagogue, and to provide clarity on the Eucharist. It is also noteworthy that John frames this discussion within an interpretation of the Isaiah text:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isaiah 55: 1ff)

Jesus tells them that he is the living bread come down from heaven and whoever eats this bread will have eternal life. Our focus last Sunday ended with the phrase, *and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*. This raises big problems for his Jewish audience. How can his flesh be given to eat they wonder among themselves? Such an idea is blasphemy against the Jewish purity laws. Then Jesus becomes even more offensive to them. He says:

unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

Classic interpretations of this passage point to a metaphorical meaning which is pointing us to faith in Christ. This is ever the compelling motive for John. Near the end of his gospel he confesses that he wrote the Gospel so that readers would believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God.

So, while on one level, feeding on Jesus' "flesh and blood" can be understood as a reference to union with Jesus in faith, in that we draw life from Christ, but it also takes us deeper. His life as a man, a man of flesh and blood, is spilled out for the life of the world. This is John's message here and elsewhere (verse 51). So, the church needs to see in this a pointer to its own experience in the Eucharist.

We need to remember that John has no story of the last supper on which our communion liturgy is based. This chapter is John's reflection on the last supper and the meaning of ingesting by faith the life of Jesus. So, if these words of Jesus about eating his flesh and drinking his blood is at one level, at least, a meditation on the Eucharist, then we need to see that the communion meal we experience can never be reduced to a mere memorial meal, a dead tradition of remembering.

As spiritual nomads we began our journey of faith that continues to deepen through our relationship with Christ, and especially at the table when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. But faith encountered us at some point in our lives with the power to change us. Just as Paul says in many places, Christians are people who have made a turn in their lives, from idols to God. (1Thessalonians 1:9).

This is the point of Jesus homily here in John. Our union with Christ in his life, death and resurrection has created a relationship with God through Christ that is profoundly intimate. The Message translation of verse 56 puts it boldly: *By eating my flesh and drinking my blood you enter into me and I into you.* In contrast to your Jewish ancestors, Jesus says to them, who ate manna in the wilderness and yet who died, those who eat this bread from heaven will live forever.

Some of you may remember the day when our Presbyterian Churches had a preparation service on Friday night. It was designed to prepare new members and others for the communion service on Sunday. Sessions were very careful in the acceptance of new members. The Session met and a report was read of those who had applied for membership. A vote was passed to receive those who applied, followed by the preparatory service for Sunday's communion service. At the communion service the new members, along with the established members in good standing, received the sacrament. "Good Standing" is the important word. The old school Presbyterians called this "fencing the Table". Not only did one have to be a member to receive the sacrament, but also to be in good standing in the community. Thankfully our churches have moved to a more generous and welcoming attitude to the Lord's Supper.

John makes clear in this long discourse on the bread from heaven that faith is at the very heart of Eucharist and at the heart of our Christian journey. A living, dynamic, intimate relationship is at the centre of Jesus' teaching here. So, John wishes us to descend to two levels in this teaching: one of a faith that derives its vitality from being in Christ and two, one of faith that receives Christ in communion.

What strikes me in this is that believing in Jesus can never be isolated from the body, the church, without losing something really important. Spiritual nomads thrive in Christian community, sharing in its worship, and in its table fellowship. So, while our individualism today smarts at this idea, it remains at the heart of this Gospel.

As the end of this passage reminds us, some find this teaching offensive and too demanding. Some followers slink off never to follow him again. But Peter reminds us that outside of the fellowship of Christ's circle of faith it is virtually impossible to sustain faith. It can never be a solo journey for spiritual nomads.

Living in isolation from the faith community, would be like trying to row a dragon boat solo. A living faith is one that is bound to Jesus in intimate relationship and to brothers and sisters at table fellowship. Our faith is nourished within this experience of community, and our witness to the world is strengthened by it. For that reason, the life of

faith, born of the Spirit and nourished by Christ's flesh and blood, derives its strength, both from our union with Christ and with his people around the table.

Amen