

REAL MEAT AND REAL DRINK

What is wisdom? A contemporary dictionary defines wisdom as “understanding of what is true, right and lasting.” A wise man, then, is a man who has embraced enduring truths and virtues. This definition of wisdom comes more or less directly from ancient Greeks like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who first described these enduring truths and virtues and showed how they could be acquired through disciplined study, careful reasoning, and the accumulation of knowledge.

The ancient Jews had a very different idea of wisdom. To them, wisdom was not the fruit of study, reasoning and knowledge, but a blessing that came from having a relationship with God, from “calling on His Name.” The Jews regarded prophets like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah as the wisest of men because they had had close personal relationships with God. So for the Greeks, wisdom was knowing philosophical truth; for the Jews, wisdom was knowing God. One was a matter of human achievement; the other was a divine blessing.

Now it's important to remember that the Bible was written almost entirely by Jews and not by Greeks—it is a Jewish book—and when its authors use the word “wisdom,” they are using it in the Jewish sense of the term. Wisdom, in the Bible, is a divine gift. Moreover, it is a gift of vital importance to spiritual life. In the *Book of Proverbs*, wisdom is frequently equated with life itself. The absence of wisdom is called “foolishness” or “folly” and is equated with death. In the 8th Proverb, Wisdom is personified as a woman who calls out: “Whoever finds me finds life...and...whoever hates me loves death.” In the 9th Proverb, today's *Old Testament* lesson, Wisdom invites people to a banquet she has prepared for them in her house: “Let all who are simple come in here!” she says to those who lack judgment. “Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding.” “Leave YOUR simple ways and walk with ME—and you will live.” To try to live apart from wisdom is to be a fool and to face certain destruction. In Folly's house, “the dead are there and her guests are in the depths of the grave.”

In this morning's Epistle lesson from the *Book of Ephesians*, Paul, a Jew from Tarsus talks about this relationship between wisdom and spiritual life: “Be careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.... Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In Paul's New Testament vocabulary, “wisdom” comes from immersing yourself in the Triune God. Being filled with the Holy Spirit. Always giving thanks to God the Father. Doing everything you do in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Again, wisdom does not come from the accumulating knowledge: it comes from having a living relationship with the Lord. As we worship and pray and study His Word, He makes us “wise unto salvation.”

Now if we can understand this distinctively Jewish idea of wisdom, it will help us grasp what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel lesson from the 6th chapter of the *Gospel of John*. And we can use the help because there are probably no other words Jesus spoke that have provoked as much controversy as these words have. They shocked his followers to the extent that many of them turned away and no longer followed Him. In fact they remain shocking to us, two thousand years later.

Up to the point in *Chapter Six* where our Gospel lesson begins, Jesus had been telling His Jewish followers that He was the "bread of heaven"—that is, a source of spiritual nourishment to those who followed Him. There was nothing particularly shocking in that figure of speech: "bread" was simply a symbol of the nourishing power of God's Word. Rabbis were regarded by their followers as transmitters of God's word which provided spiritual nourishment and sustenance. It was especially fitting for Jesus to refer to himself as the "bread of life" since he had been born in Beth-lechem, whose name meant "house of bread." But when the Jews began to question Jesus' credentials as a source of spiritual nourishment, he upped the ante: *"...here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. **This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.**"*

As we like to say nowadays, "Whoa!" This was something new and completely different. The "bread" of spiritual nourishment that Jesus claims to be offering them is His flesh, which he will give for the life of the world. This shocking claim sets His Jewish followers to sharply arguing among themselves. *"How," they exclaim in amazement, "can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* The cannibalistic implications of Jesus' words provoke a violent reaction from the Jews—as they would from anyone.

Now at this point you might expect Jesus to say something like, *"Now wait a minute, folks, I was just using a figure of speech to make a point. I wasn't referring to my actual flesh."* But that's not at all what Jesus does. In fact, He makes it clear that his physical flesh and blood are exactly what He IS referring to, and by doing that, he escalates the dialogue to a whole new level of offense. Listen to his words: *"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me."*

Wow! What can one say? It's hard to imagine anything that would have offended His Jewish followers more than these words. The prohibitions against drinking blood—let alone human blood—were among the strongest in the *Torah* and in Jewish tradition. They even preceded the Mosaic Law. Jesus appeared to be endorsing cannibalism, pure and simple. What could he possibly have meant?

Well, there are two markedly different interpretations Biblical scholars have placed upon these words of Jesus. Some scholars argue that He was obviously referring to the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord's Supper, which He would later give to His disciples as a means through which they could remain connected to Him after He had ascended into heaven. It's pretty hard to rule this out; after all, why else would Jesus talk about eating

his flesh and drinking His blood? He who knew all things knew that His disciples—as well as future generations of disciples—would remember His words and logically connect them with the eating of His body and drinking of His blood in Holy Communion. At other times Jesus had said things to his followers that they couldn't understand at the time but whose meaning became clear to them later. On one occasion he said to the Jews: *“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days”*—knowing that they would not understand what he meant at the time but would later realize that He had been referring to His body, which would rise from the grave after three days? The Bible tells us that: *“After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.”* (John 2:22) Was Jesus teaching them in advance about the importance of communion? *“For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.”* Sure sounds like the Lord's Supper, doesn't it?

Other scholars have concluded that Jesus must have been speaking figuratively, and only used such vivid language to make sure his followers understood that He alone was the source of spiritual life. After all, hadn't He described Himself to the woman at the well as a “spring of living water” and to the Jews as the “bread of life”? In the same way, he was telling them now that He was the only “real meat and real drink” that nourished souls unto eternal life.

You'll have to decide for yourself which explanation is the right one! John later tells us that as a result of Jesus having said these things, *“...many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”* His words seemed to act as a watershed, dividing those who were willing to accept them despite their obvious offense, and those who were not. Whichever way we take His words, one thing is clear: Jesus was telling His disciples—including us—that He wants to have the most ***intimate possible*** relationship with us. You might say that he wants to live in a state of *osmosis* with us where we absorb Him and He absorbs us—where He lives IN us and we live IN Him. Jesus doesn't want to be “buddies” with us, He wants to be part of us and impart His wisdom to us so that we may live and flourish in His love. He wants to take our sins and give us His grace, His mercy, His peace. That's what HE wants. You need to decide if that is what YOU want.

Wisdom—real wisdom—is not something we produce out of ourselves. It is a blessing our heavenly Father gives those who become part of His family. May this blessing be multiplied unto you.

Amen.

Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her servants, and she calls from the highest point of the city, “Let all who are simple come to my house!” To those who have no sense she says, “Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of insight.”

Ephesians 5:15-21

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

John 6:48-59

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.