

A Sermon Preached by

The Rev. Canon William M. Johnston for Proper 15, The Season After Pentecost, Year B
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Of all the controversies that have plagued Christianity, none has persisted longer than the question: “How does one gain salvation?” No matter what side of the question people are on, most all agree that it is God who gives salvation. It is a free gift from the Father. Also, few will argue against the fact that salvation comes as a result of faith in Christ Jesus. Ultimately, then, the for most question is, “What constitutes faith?”

Is it simply believing, being baptized and receiving Holy Communion? Or is true faith, and thus salvation, dependent on our behavior or on our good works?

Extremes on one side produce Christians who ignore the sacraments altogether and declare personal piety to be the basis for God’s judgment.

Extremes on the other produce Christians who approach the sacraments as kinds of magical rites which result in salvation completely divorced from any piety or lack thereof in the individual.

Which is right? Or are neither of them right, with the truth lying somewhere in between?

Actually, one can find scriptural justification for the importance of both sacraments and good works done in the name of the Lord.

In the Gospel according to St. John, for instance, we find Jesus quoted as saying, “Anyone who believes in the son has eternal life.” (Jn 3:35) This passage, taken by itself, would lead one to believe that all one had to do was acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God for salvation to be automatic. One could conclude that lip service was sufficient.

But in the fifth chapter we read Jesus’ words, “Whoever listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life.” (Jn 5:24)

And then, in the eighth chapter Jesus, speaking to several people who had just come to believe in Him, says, “If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples.” (Jn 8:31)

Here we see a progressive disclosure of what it means to believe. It is not mere intellectual acceptance of a fact, but being moved to action as a result of that acceptance. True discipleship is not possible without believing. There is no way a person can be considered a Christian (no matter how many good works he does) without believing Jesus to be the Christ.

Likewise, it is not true belief unless we are making His word our home – that we are seeking to live within and according to His word.

As Jesus said, “It is not those who say to me “Lord, Lord, who enter the Kingdom, but those who do the will of My Father in Heaven.”

We must see the sacramental teaching in the scriptures in the same light. In our Gospel reading for today there can be no doubt that Jesus is talking about the Eucharist when He speaks of “eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man.”

In order to understand His statement “Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life’ (Jn 6:54), we must understand the historical and cultural context in which these words were spoken and the meaning that these words had when they were first heard. We automatically translate flesh and blood into bread and wine. There was no such translation for Jesus’ original audience.

They were quite accustomed to the concept of people eating sacrificial animals and with the idea that when an animal was sacrificed to a god, people believed that the god actually

entered into the animal and that when this meat was eaten, the participants in the meal actually took into themselves the character and power of the god.

Their understanding of the nature of blood was also quite specific. Because an animal or person died when its blood was drained, it was believed that blood was the very essence of a creature's life and that if you consumed a creature's blood, you took its life into you. You took on its life; it lived in you. That's why the apostles forbade believers from eating anything sacrificed to idols. (Acts 15:29) and why the Jews were ordered to eat no meat unless all the blood had been drained from it. Even today there are sects who refuse blood transfusions for the same reason.

Thus Jesus' words concerning the eating of His flesh and drinking of His blood had tremendous impact. His insistence that His flesh must be eaten and His blood must be drunk in all likelihood shook them to

the core of their being. Some disciples, we learn later from St. John, were so shaken by these words that they stopped following Him. (Jn 6:66)

These words are totally confusing apart from the Eucharist. There is no question that they were meant to be understood within that context. They come directly after Jesus has declared Himself to be "The living bread which has come down from heaven." (Jn 6:51)

But, at the same time, it is good that we consider them apart from any mention of the Last Supper, lest they lose their impact and we miss their meaning by thinking that Jesus is talking of no more than ceremonial eating of a bit of bread and taking a sip of wine in His memory. Rather than allowing the Last Supper to interpret these words, we must also allow these words to interpret the Last Supper.

Here in this passage from John we find the very essence of the meaning of Communion. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him. As I, who am sent by the Living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me." (Jn 6:56-57)

Here is our opportunity to feast at the heavenly banquet and drink at the well of life.

True communion involves far more than eating consecrated bread and drinking consecrated wine. There is a very real sense in which one has not truly made his or her communion unless the heart is in it. It is not like taking a vitamin pill that does its work whether or not we cooperate with it or even, for that matter, when we do not recognize it as beneficial.

Our will, intent, and faith is always an essential part of our relationship with God. This is true in the sacrament of Holy Communion no less than any other encounter with God.

Also, lack of faith or mindless reception of the Sacrament has no effect whatever on Christ's presence in the Eucharist. It is the Body and Blood of Christ whether we perceive it so or not. But the effect of that reception is greatly dependent on our spiritual condition.

As St. Paul said, "The Blessing Cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ." (2 Cor 10: 16)

He says that anyone "eating this bread and drinking the cup of the Lord unworthily is behaving unworthily towards the body and blood of the Lord." (1 Cor 11:28-29) And that "Everyone is to recollect himself before eating this bread and drinking this cup; because a person who eats and drinks without recognizing the body is eating and drinking his own condemnation." (1 Cor 11:28-29)

Being worthy, of course, has nothing to do with being good enough. If that were the case, there would be no communions made today in this church or any other. To be worthy is to be judged worthy because of our faith in Jesus as the Christ. As we learn in the epistle to the

Romans, "If Christ is in you then your spirit is life itself because you have been justified." (Rom 8:10)

Also in Romans we learn that if the spirit of Christ lives in us and we are moved by that spirit, we become a son or daughter of God (Rom 8:14). This is what makes us worthy. And what about recollecting ourselves? This means to recall who we are; that we are God's children, feeding at our Father's table and taking into ourselves the very being of His only begotten Son Jesus.

St. Paul's words concerning recognizing the body can have two meanings. Certainly it means recognizing the presence of our Lord in the sacrament; but might it not also include recognizing the body of Christ in the church and recalling our part in that body, our ministry within that body, our particular function for which the sacramental body of Christ strengthens us?

So often, in communion, we think of our taking Christ's body into our body but forget that the purpose of this is really that we may function as part of His body. Are we not here to offer to Him ourselves, our souls and bodies?

Communion is to become one with Christ. It is both a receiving and a giving transaction. In it we receive forgiveness and comfort to be sure, but it is also an occasion for strengthening and renewal, that we may more perfectly serve the Lord. Thus it is also a pledge on our part to go forth as the people of God to live the life in the spirit, to seek His power that we might grow in our fitness as a dwelling place for Christ, dying daily to sin and becoming more alive to God in Christ. (Rom 6;11)

So that with St. Paul and all the other saints we may proclaim, "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed Himself for my sake." (Gal 2:20-21) "Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

Let us now join in our celebration of thanksgiving for life in Christ, rejoicing that by our faith we have been judged worthy, recollecting our being as sons and daughters of the Most High, recognizing the presence of the Lord in the sacrament, and our own part in His Body the Church.