

Cannibalism and Communion

A sermon on John 6:51-58 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 August 2018

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Message

Jesus confronts us with our cannibalistic behaviour in order that we might follow him into a saving communion with God and one another.

Sermon

One of the charges levelled against the early church by its opponents was that our secret ceremonies included ritual cannibalism. It wasn't true, but when you hear what Jesus had to say in the reading we heard tonight, you can see how easily such a misunderstanding could have arisen. Try and imagine yourself having no previous experience of Christian beliefs or practices, and listen again, as though for the first time.

Jesus said, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." And a fight broke out among his hearers who were saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So 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. Those who chew up and devour my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who chew up and devour my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

You may be thinking that I've tried to make it sound more extreme than it really is, because it doesn't say "chew up and devour" in your Bible, so let me explain. In most English versions, it does in fact just say "eat". But in the original Greek, John uses the normal word for "eat" the first time, but then he switches to another word, a word that was normally used for things like wild animals tearing up a kill.

When my wife sees our dogs eating, she is often grossed out, because there is this ravenous frenzy in which you can hear bones splintering and see blood splattering. That's the sort of image this Greek word usually evoked. When this word is used of humans, their eating is being portrayed as inhuman, savage, and disgusting.

When the people start fighting over how Jesus can talk of eating his flesh, he doesn't tone it down, or spiritualise it, or inform them that it is only a figure of speech. He ramps it up. Having already scandalised people with images of cannibalism, he now makes it worse by changing words to make it sound even more revolting.

This would have been even more shocking to his Jewish listeners than it is to us, because consuming blood is an even stronger taboo in the Jewish food laws than the well known prohibition of pork. Way back in Genesis, God had said, "You shall not eat flesh with its blood" (9:4), and the law in Leviticus clearly said, "You must not eat any blood." (3:17). In the Hebrew Bible, only the wild animals and birds of prey are told "You shall eat flesh and drink blood" (Ezekiel 39:17).

What's more, the term "flesh" is different to the term "meat." It implies something that has not been properly butchered or prepared for human consumption. If Jesus had even just told people to consume the flesh and blood of an animal, he would still have been accused of

urging them to break God's laws, but here he is talking of making a meal of human flesh and blood.

Everything about what Jesus says is utterly repulsive, taboo, and offensive to the sensibilities of his hearers. So much so that our usual response to this passage has been to quickly jump to talking about the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper and totally spiritualise it. But Jesus's words are far too extreme for a benign little explanation of the niceties of holy communion in genteel churches.

So what on earth is going on? Such an obvious intent to shock and disturb suggests that Jesus was needing to resort to extreme measures to break through some entrenched misunderstandings or some major resistance to his message. But what is it all about?

Well, one possible answer is based on verse 56 which says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," and it links those words with an old belief that the life or soul of any creature resided in its blood. In some cultures that belief led people to say that people acquire something of the spirit of the animals they eat and so if you eat a lot of one thing, you become increasingly like that thing. So when Jesus speaks of consuming his flesh and blood, he could be speaking of us consuming and being consumed by his Spirit, ingesting and indwelling one another, and so becoming more and more like him.

Now I have no doubt that Jesus wants to abide in us and us to dwell in him and become more and more like him, but that good news does not seem to require such violent and grotesque imagery to explain it, and nor does it seem like something we'd be so resistant to hearing that Jesus would need to resort to shock tactics to get us to listen. We need an explanation that does justice to the extreme language that Jesus is using here.

I believe that what Jesus is doing here is ripping the band aids off the festering wound of the human condition, exposing things we desperately don't want to see. Most of us like to think of ourselves as basically good folks who just slip up a little bit from time to time and perhaps need a bit of spiritual help to put some finishing touches on otherwise essentially good lives. And because that is the way we think, one of the hardest things about evangelism and Christian formation is enabling people to see how desperately they need to be rescued, saved, liberated, not just slightly improved.

Partly as a result of this, in our resistance, we have turned the whole concept of salvation into nothing more than a get out of jail free card after death, because that enables us to maintain the delusion that nothing much needs changing now. But Jesus said that the reign of God was at hand now and that salvation was first and foremost salvation from being chewed up and devoured by the voracious monster of human sin in the here and now.

So what is the nature of this beast and are we really so much in its grip that we can appropriately be likened to cannibals?

A while back, a friend and I were having a random conversation about how much we would spend on a pair of boots. We had both decided that we were prepared to spend several hundred dollars to buy boots which we knew had been made in factories that paid proper living wages to their workers rather than save ourselves a heap of money by buying a pair that

had almost certainly been made in a sweat shop by workers who couldn't afford to feed their families.

But at the same time, we recognised how inadequate that was. There were any number of reasons why our nice little ethical choice over the boots does almost nothing to free us from the deadly tentacles of a global social and economic system that chews up people and devours them whole. Firstly, we only have the luxury of being able to make such a choice because we are wealthy enough to be able to afford to. Secondly, while our choices may apply some pressure to exploitative manufacturers to provide better wages and conditions, it might also, at least in the short term, just result in them laying off workers who could already barely survive.

And most importantly, the fact that human lives are being chewed up in one part of the world to ensure a supply of cheap footwear in another part of the world is no more than the tip of the iceberg, and it is impossible to recognise and make enough of those choices to extricate ourselves from all complicity with the machinery of death and destruction.

To the best of my knowledge there is no ethically sound supplier of fuel for my car, and I might as well be filling the tank with the blood of Iraqi children who died when our country invaded theirs, safeguarding our access to oil under the guise of a war against terrorism. And every time I cut a slice of bread, I might as well be slicing up the corpses of Aboriginal people who were massacred as their land was stolen to grow our wheat. "Take this bread and eat. This is my body. This is my flesh and blood."

The terrifying truth is that the whole system is held together by violence. Deadly violence if need be. We regularly send out the navy or the army to make sure that boatloads of desperate frightened poor people don't arrive on our shores seeking a share of the wealth and privilege that we have plundered for ourselves.

We will devour whoever we need to devour to keep the system working for us, but we like to insulate ourselves from awareness of the killing by employing properly authorised professionals to do it for us under the cover of law and order and international conventions. But it is done in our name, because we live in fear that if we don't stay strong and stay ahead, we might be the next to be devoured, and so we go on consuming the proceeds; cannibalising our victims, one purchase at a time. "Take this bread and eat. This is my body. This is my flesh and blood."

So what does feeding on the body and blood of Jesus have to do with saving us from this cannibalistic orgy of exploitation, fear and violence? Firstly, and perhaps most importantly in explaining the shocking language Jesus uses here, salvation begins with knowing our need of it. Jesus is trying to get us to see that we are so embedded in these systems of violent exploitation that there will be blood dripping from our teeth whether we stay in or try to get out.

The only way to break the cycle was for Jesus to throw himself into its jaws, so we need to face the fact that there is no moral high ground. Our horrifying predicament was built on the constant murdering of innocent victims, and our salvation is equally dependent on the murder of an innocent victim. The difference is that the first is built on inflicting sacrifices, and the way out is built on a freely given self-sacrifice as Jesus hands himself over to our

voracious, cannibalistic system and unmasks it, stripping it forever of its cloak of legitimacy, of the defamatory lies that it was the will of God and the only means of maintaining peace.

So Jesus names us among the cannibalistic exploiters so that we might recognise that we are just as blood stained as those who kill in our name, and thus knowing our guilt, we might be able to take the radical path of salvation that Jesus opens up for us.

And the path of salvation in Jesus involves following him in siding with the victims and inaugurating a new culture of mercy and reconciliation. The usual human quest for salvation involves changing places and coming out on top. The victims overthrow the oppressors and become oppressors themselves, but this doesn't overthrow the system at all, it just rearranges the deck chairs.

The path of salvation in Jesus overthrows the whole system by refusing to play the competitive game where everyone scrambles for the spoils of victory, even if those spoils were gained through bloodshed. The path of salvation in Jesus says that our only involvement in violence will be in suffering it, and that our response to suffering it will be to smother its perpetrators in mercy and love and courageous honesty.

This, of course, is no quick and easy fix that tells me what to spend on my next pair of boots. This is the beginning of a non-violent revolution, a revolution of self-sacrificial love that neutralises hatred, bitterness and violence by absorbing them and refusing to replicate them. It doesn't quickly cut us free from being entangled in injustice, but it is precisely in choosing to know and side with our victims, beginning with Jesus, that we humanise them and set in motion the wheels of change.

Many more victims will be tragically devoured before the revolution of love is complete, and Jesus suffers in and with every one of them, building a new communion of solidarity in suffering love.

So here we gather at this table and are confronted in the most shocking terms with the truth of our grotesque cannibalism, and we are invited to stop covering it up and to begin to acknowledge it so that with our eyes fully opened to the truth, we might be able to see the path of healing and salvation. Here the ultimate victim of our cannibalism invites us to feed on him again, but no longer for the purposes of feeding the violent system, but now so that we might become one with him in offering up ourselves, flesh and blood to be true food and true drink for the life of the world.