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# St. John's Discourse on the Bread of Life with special reference to Jn. 6 : 52-59

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St. John 6:52-59 is a difficult passage. In understanding these verses one is often tempted either to seek too simple a solution by explaining it metaphorically, divesting it of all sacramental significance, or to make the 'hard saying' easy by resorting to a solely Eucharistic interpretation. But there is no easy way out. We have to hold in balance the two sayings of our Lord: '... Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have no life in yourselves' (53); and 'It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life' (63): and arrive at a line of interpretation.

## GENERAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE DISCOURSE

The sixth chapter of St. John conforms to the general pattern of an episode followed by a discourse purporting to elucidate the meaning of the incident (in this case the miracle of the feeding of the multitude); and concluding with an appendix or epilogue (66-71). Taking its start with the miracle of the loaves and fishes the discourse moves on steadily, exposing the inadequacy of the conception of Messiah as a second Moses who gave manna from heaven, and finally confronts the Jews in the crudest manner possible with the necessity of belief in the historical Jesus. Here St. John, while answering the Gnostic and Docetic attacks on the reality of the Incarnation, warns his readers about the dangers of a crude and materialistic interpretation of the Eucharist. As against the former he emphasizes the reality of Christ's 'flesh', i.e. the Incarnate life, and His 'blood', i.e. the atoning sacrifice; and as against the latter he stresses the need of a lively faith as the only means by which Christ's 'flesh' and 'blood' can be appropriated to become the food of the soul. Those who partake of this true food gain abiding union with Him. Some of the expressions used in the discourse are intelligible only in the light of Eucharistic experience. It should, however, be noticed that the

sacramental references are brought in parenthetically. While St. John does not want to 'spiritualize' the sacraments he is concerned about rooting their efficacy in the material, and the material in the real humanity of our Lord. The author is troubled by those who refused to believe that the Son of God had come in the flesh and wanted a purely 'spiritual' religion. He wants to show that the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus are a prolegomenon not only for the eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood but also for the understanding of what that eating and drinking means. Taken as a whole the discourse is neither a piece of teaching on the Eucharistic practice of the Christians, nor an anti-sacramental preachment in favour of 'spiritual' communion. The real theme of the discourse appears to be faith and unbelief. But the discourse as a whole, the third section in particular, is couched in Eucharistic language. St. John's doctrine of 'feeding on Christ' is a spiritual and mystical doctrine; yet by 51b-58 he means to suggest that at any rate one of the methods of this feeding on Christ is through the sacrament of the Holy Communion. The language of the discourse is Eucharistic, and was understood as such from the second century.

#### STRUCTURE OF THE DISCOURSE

The sixth chapter opens with the episode of the feeding of the multitude in its traditional setting. 'Now the passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand' (4) forms a theological introduction to the story. It was against the background of the passover, when the Jews feasted on the paschal lamb, that Jesus fed the people, and announced that He was the bread of life and that the bread He would give was His flesh. This cannot fail to remind the Christian reader that the Christian passover is the Eucharist. The narrative of the feeding is given in significant language. 'Jesus took the loaves; and having given thanks, he distributed to them' (11). Here the word used is *εὐχαριστήσας*. Again the phrase 'after the Lord had given thanks' in verse 23 picks up the sacramental reference. In verse 12 'Gather up the broken pieces which remain over' the words *συναγάγετε* and *κλάσματα* are generally used of gathering up of the Eucharistic remains.

The discourse which follows aims at showing that the only way to life is through belief in Jesus, a belief involving continuous feeding on Jesus of Nazareth, i.e. perpetual communion with Him. This is developed in three stages.

(i) Verses 26-34 is the discourse on the bread of life parallel to the one on the water of life in the fourth chapter. People come to Jesus seeking Him because they want something which He alone can give. Jesus reveals to the Galilean crowd certain deep mysteries in course of which He refers to Himself as 'bread of life'. Life can be sustained only by 'eating' this bread. But what does this 'eating' mean? Is it Spiritual communion, or does it indicate sacramental eating? Further, why was a *syna-*

gogue in Capernaum chosen for imparting this teaching on the living bread? We do not know. But it has been suggested that St. John was concerned about removing certain magical and crudely materialistic notions about the Eucharist. For such a purpose the scene of the Last Supper was not considered a suitable occasion, but the synagogue the traditional centre for instruction. Even though the Last Supper with its institution of the Eucharist is not recorded in this Gospel, it is presumed throughout; and the discourse is full of echoes of the Lord's Supper. In the Synoptic Gospels the story of the Last Supper begins with the mention of passover and concludes with the announcement of the treachery of Judas. In the same manner the discourse on the bread of life is given in the context of the feast of passover and ends with the mention of Judas Iscariot (71). We cannot help noticing the similarity between the narrative of the Last Supper and that of the chapter on the living bread. The first stage of the discourse ends with the people's request for the bread of life: 'Lord, evermore give us this bread' (34).

(ii) The second part of the discourse is embraced by verses 35-51 and is summed up in the words 'I am the living bread... the bread which I shall give ( $\delta\acute{\omega}\sigma\omega$ ) is my flesh'. Thus a new idea is introduced at this point. Jesus has been speaking of the bread of life as coming down from heaven. Now He speaks of the bread as His flesh, and of feeding on Him as 'eating' His flesh and 'drinking' His blood. The Jews who have already found it difficult to accept Jesus as the bread come down from heaven are scandalized by the further suggestion that Jesus was to give them His flesh to eat.

'I am the living bread' (51a) is an idea parallel to the expression 'living water' and conveys the teaching that He as the living One imparts life to those who seek Him. This leads on to a more difficult idea 'the bread which I will give is my flesh, for ( $\acute{\upsilon}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho$ ) the life of the world' (51b). The gift that is promised is His perfect humanity. The central idea of the fourth Gospel is 'the word became flesh'. Therefore there can be no belief in Jesus as Saviour apart from the acknowledgement that He has come in the flesh. The preposition  $\acute{\upsilon}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho$  in the phrase 'for the life of the world' means 'on behalf of the world's life' and hints at the atoning death of Jesus Christ which is made evident by the mention of His blood.

(iii) Verses 52-58 are the concluding section of the discourse on the living bread. Verse 59 is the formal conclusion: 'These things he said in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum.' This passage contains an indirect answer to the question raised in 52, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' The answer is given in sacramental terms. Appropriation of our Lord's humanity is the theme of this section. Eating and drinking Christ's flesh and blood is not the same thing as faith, though faith is the means of it. It is an actual and vital union with Christ's Incarnate life, whereby the believer dwells in Christ and

Christ in him, and the benefits of Christ's passion are communicated to him: 'How can this man give us his flesh?' elicits the answer that it is through His sacrificial death that Jesus becomes the food of the faithful. 'This is my body which is broken for you . . . this cup is the new covenant in my blood.' These Eucharistic words of Jesus seem to lie behind 'the hard saying' contained in this part of the discourse. The Eucharistic feast has its origin in the sacrificial death of the Son of Man. It is at once a commemoration of the sacrifice once offered; and it also communicates its benefits to those who partake with faith. To eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood is as necessary for salvation as belief on Him. The primary reference here is to faith in the historic Incarnation; but the realistic imagery employed here points to the Eucharist which ought not to be evaded. The body or the flesh of Jesus refers to the Incarnate life which was broken for us on the Cross, and the blood is His life which was triumphant in and through that self-offering. Hence we receive the Holy Communion in two kinds: the body *and* the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The unusual Greek word *τρώγων* used instead of the common *ἐσθίων* in verse 54 calls for comment. In this passage *τρώγων* is used four times. It is also used in 13:18. In this instance, while quoting Ps. 4:9, St. John changes *ἐσθίων* of the LXX into *τρώγων*. It seems to be the habit of the fourth Evangelist to use *τρώγω* for *ἐσθίω* in the context of the Last Supper or the Eucharist. It is an unusual word meaning munching or eating audibly and is used of animals as they graze in the field. While *τρώγων* also means eating with relish it is seldom used of eating flesh. The saying 'unless you munch and eat with enjoyment the flesh of the Son of Man, etc.' makes the saying more provocative and harder to understand. In view of such crude language employed there is little room left for a 'spiritual' interpretation of the passage in question. The eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of the Son of Man involves a real physical eating and drinking as in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Eucharistic food and drink are physically bread and wine and spiritually flesh and blood of the Saviour. Together they form the means of the spiritual sustenance of the believer.

#### FLESH AND BODY

It is sometimes argued in favour of an exclusively spiritual interpretation of the passage that whereas in the Synoptic Gospels the first species of the sacrament is called 'body', the fourth Gospel refers to it as 'flesh'. Therefore 'flesh' here means the person of Jesus to be appropriated by faith, but not the 'body' relating to the rite of the Lord's Supper, to be taken into the mouth and eaten. There is some substance to this contention, because the accounts of the Lord's Supper in the Synoptic Gospels and in 1 Cor. XI use the words 'body' and 'blood', rather than

'flesh and blood'. Seeing that 'flesh and blood' means personality in its totality inclusive of the bodiliness, it is argued that the expression 'eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus' legitimately means appropriating Him by faith. But closer investigation into the usage of the terms *σῶμα* and *σάρξ* does not bear this out.

Here we may recall the conclusions of the study made by Prof. Jeremias of the Eucharistic words of Jesus. The words used by our Lord at the institution of the Eucharist were 'this is my body; this is my blood'. Here *σῶμα* and *σάρξ* constitute a twin concept on the lips of Jesus, but the Aramaic equivalent of *σῶμα* is not easy to come by. *Gūph* cannot be regarded as the equivalent of *σῶμα*, for it is nowhere coupled with *αἷμα*. The Aramaic twin concept corresponding to the Greek *σῶμα-αἷμα* is *bāsār-dām* (flesh and blood) as in Ezk. 39:17. This is the only pair of words that can be considered appropriate to Jesus' word of interpretation. Linguistically there can be no objection that the Aramaic word *bāsār* underlies *σῶμα* in Jesus' word of interpretation. The LXX in 143 cases translates *bāsār* by *σάρξ* and only in 23 cases by *σῶμα*. Rom. 8:13 uses *σῶμα* and *σάρξ* interchangeably. The Syriac version renders 51*b* as 'the bread which I shall give is my *body* for the life of the world'. The Syriac versions rendered *σάρξ* wherever it occurred in the sixth chapter of St. John by the Syriac word *pagar* which is the rendering of *σῶμα* in the Synoptic accounts of the Lord's Supper. The Syriac Church's translation of the sixth chapter of St. John is such that a Eucharistic reference is unmistakable. In all probability the Aramaic words of Jesus at the Last Supper were '*dēn bisri*' (flesh) and '*dēn 'idhmi*' (blood). Further St. John is committed to the employment of *σάρξ* by reason of his momentous statement *καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο* in 1:14. Thus the substitution of *σάρξ* for *σῶμα* becomes easily understandable.

#### SPIRIT AND TRUTH

Now we come to the appendix of the discourse on the bread of life, 60-69. The whole contrast between the bread that perishes and the true bread is summed up by the saying 'It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing'. Yet the eternal *λόγος* was made flesh and through it established communion with man. The idea of attaining eternal life by feeding upon the flesh of the Son of Man may be scandalous to the non-Christian readers of St. John. It can, however, be rightly understood by those who know the descent as well as the ascent of Christ. It is after ascension that the Holy Spirit will make them partakers of the flesh, and they will receive it by faith. What imparts the power of everlasting life to those who feed upon the flesh of Jesus is not the flesh as such but the spirit which pervades it. In this passage no contrast is intended to be established between flesh and spirit or matter and spirit. When flesh is

penetrated by the Spirit of God it becomes the life-giving bread. (Thus in St. John the doctrine of the sacraments is closely related to that of the Spirit.) Meanwhile the words of Christ are spirit and life. There is a real difficulty in interpreting verse 63. But there is no contradiction for St. John between the statement that life comes through feeding upon the flesh and blood of Christ, and the saying that His words are life and truth. When our Lord said, 'It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing', He is stating the truth in its general form using the same contrast as in 3:6. In every case is it true that flesh without spirit cannot impart life. All the same the saying has some bearing on the contrast between the carnal and the spiritual apprehension of Christ, and on the spiritual and sacramental participation of the Incarnate Lord. The ascension of Jesus which is the final spiritualizing of the person of our Lord will remove the stumbling block in apprehending His spiritual humanity.

'The words that I have spoken unto you are spirit and are life.' The question here is whether τὰ ῥήματα refers to the words of Christ in general or to what He has been saying about His flesh and blood. It is possible to hold that it is the life-giving quality of His message as the word of God which Jesus has symbolized as food and drink. It seems equally cogent to say (with Archbishop Bernard) that it refers to the words He had been speaking to them, and to which they took exception, which are Spirit and Life; because they are the key words of His teaching about Himself and Salvation.

It is, however, to be noticed that the revelation of eternal life is given to us in the union of the word and deed, i.e. the Incarnation and the Atonement. It is not only His words that give life, but Himself is the life laid down for the world, His body and blood freely given for all. Eternal life is communicated to men, and appropriated by them by hearing and believing the word of the cross on the one hand, and by the sacramental eating on the other; the word and the sacrament.

Whether the metaphor is water or bread we are in this Gospel dealing with a process by which the believer takes into himself the divine life and by an inward change makes it his own so that he actually has 'God abiding in him'. Thus sacramentalism is a part and parcel of Johannine Christianity and has a definite place in chapters three and six, though it is introduced by way of parenthesis. He who believes is baptized; and he who verifies the words of Christ partakes of the sacrament of the body and blood of the Saviour.

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*'Dr. Kenneth Cragg's Call of the Minaret is more relevant to the Christian-Hindu conversation than anything I have yet read.'*

(C. Murray Rogers in Religion and Society)