

# The Medicine of Immortality: A University Sermon\*

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Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life  
(John 6:54).

HOMER KNOWS two principal classes of persons, gods and men. The gods are more powerful than men, they can travel at speed and become invisible at will, but for Homer the main difference between gods and men is that gods are *athanatoi*, deathless or immortal, so much so that "the immortals" becomes the other name for the gods. Further, Homer tells us that the gods drank nectar and ate *ambrosia*. *Ambrosia* of course means immortality, and, though Homer does not say this in so many words, it is fair to suppose that the gods are deathless because they eat immortality.

Nor is Homer alone in this. In the Babylonian Myth of Adapa, Adapa is tricked into refusing the bread of life and the water of life. Because he refused this gift of immortality man was henceforth subject to death. Similarly, in another Babylonian myth Gilgamesh goes after the plant that gives immortality but is cheated of his purpose by a serpent.

This last story reminds us that the idea of a food that gives immortality was not confined to the pagan world. The Old Testament also knows it. In the garden of Eden is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God has forbidden Adam and Eve to eat of it, but they do so. God rebukes them and then says: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" (Gen. 3:22). The implication is that if man both knew good and evil and had immortality he would be God. The story goes on: "So he drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). It is noteworthy that the cherubim and the flame of a sword specifically "guard the way to the tree of life." This, rather than the garden of Eden as a whole, was to be kept from man. And so man is banished from the tree of life, and the food of immortality is mentioned no more in the Old Testament.

There is one possible exception. There is the striking description of manna in Psalm 78:23-25 (RSV):

Yet he commanded the skies above,  
and opened the doors of heaven;

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and he rained down upon them manna to eat,  
and gave them the grain of heaven.  
Man ate of the bread of the angels;  
he sent them food in abundance.

Here the Hebrew word translated as "angels" is *'abbārīm* and means "mighty ones." The rendering "angels" goes back to the ancient Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, and often when the Septuagint renders "angels," *angeloi*, it is supernatural beings which are meant. This is supported by the passage in Wisdom 16:20:

Instead of these things thou didst feed thy people  
with the food of angels,  
And without their toiling didst supply them with  
bread from heaven ready to eat  
Availing for every pleasure and suited to every  
taste.

We may ask why, if the Israelites ate the food of angels in the wilderness, they still perished. We are not the first to ask this. St. Paul reports that our fathers "all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink" (1 Cor. 10:3-4). He then explains why, though the spirit gives life, they perished in the wilderness: "But with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were struck down in the desert" (1 Cor. 10:5). He then goes on to point out their misdeeds. The implication is that they perished, despite all the spiritual food they had taken, because they sinned.

But let us return to the Old Testament. With the exception of manna it knows no more, after Genesis 3, of immortality. Instead, when Israel is later given a hope of life after death, it is the hope of resurrection that they receive. God raises the faithful again from the dead.

And it is in these terms that the New Testament reports the triumph of Jesus over death: "whom God raised from the dead of which we are all witnesses" (Acts 3:15). The great proclamations of the early Church, like that of 1 Corinthians 15, are in these terms.

But then comes the question: How do we partake in this victory and resurrection? Various answers were given: that of Jesus that we rise from the dead because our God is a God not of the dead but of the living; that of St. Paul that we are one with Christ and so repeat in ourselves his death and resurrection from the dead. All this is true and the basis of magnificent doctrine, but its continual appropriation by the Christian who over the centuries had to run the course of this life and fight its fight was not always easy.

He found his means of appropriation elsewhere. We have noticed the long silence of the Old Testament about a food of immortality. This silence was at last broken perhaps in the last century before Christ in a Jewish tract called *Joseph and Asenath*. In it we read of a sacred meal in which the bread is called "the blessed bread of life" and the cup is "the blessed

cup of immortality."<sup>1</sup> These phrases, "the bread of life" and "the cup of immortality," are familiar. Where the writer found this language in this context of a meal we do not know, but he speaks a language which we shall hear again.

We hear it again in John 6. In this chapter we have first an account of the feeding of the multitude from five loaves and two fishes. Then we have an exposition of this event. The crowning statement of this exposition is in verse 35, "I am the bread of life." This statement is taken up and repeated in verse 48 where the New Testament lesson began which we heard just now. At this point the thought is developed. Jesus talks clearly and unequivocally of eating this bread which he identifies with his flesh and contrasts it with the manna which the fathers ate in the wilderness and yet died.

Next, in verses 53 and 54, the evangelist takes the argument further: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you do not have life in you" and "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has everlasting life." These words mark a second stage in the argument. We now have, in addition to "the flesh," a reference to "the blood" of Jesus. At this point we have left the feeding of the multitude firmly behind. In the feeding of the multitude we can argue that the loaves correspond to the bread of life which is the flesh of Jesus, but there is nothing corresponding to the blood of Jesus.

The parallels are in the Last Supper where Jesus says of the bread, "This is my body," and of the wine, "This is my blood." This is the flesh and the blood which gives eternal life to the partaker. The new food of immortality is not the fruit of the tree of life in the garden of Eden. It is the body and blood of the Lord.

Once this identification has been made we find other Christian writers using similar language. For example, Ignatius of Antioch, writing not long after the appearance of the Gospel according to St. John, refers to the Eucharist as the medicine of immortality.<sup>2</sup> Like statements are in use today. When I receive the body of the Lord I am told, "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life," and with the blood of the Lord, "The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life."<sup>3</sup>

How did Christians come to this belief? Israel and the early Church lived in a different world of thought from ours. Let me illustrate this. We are familiar with the word "sacrament." The New Testament lacks this word and the corresponding idea. Instead, the Bible talks of offering and sacrifice. Sacrifice is an institution completely foreign to our Western world. When we discuss it, it is the scholastic theory of sacrifice from the Middle

1. P. Batiffol (ed.), *Studia Patristica*, Vol. I (Paris: Leroux, 1889), p. 49.

2. Ignatius, *Ephes.* 20:2.

3. *Book of Common Prayer*, The Communion.

Ages that we have in mind more often than not. For ancient man and for the Bible, sacrifice is first and foremost a means to the releasing and conveying of life and power. In this way the Eucharist is a sacrifice, conveying life and power in the offering of the body and blood of the Lord of which we partake.

If we look at the sacrifices of the Bible and the ancient world we find that the power or strength of the offering released in sacrifice achieved definite ends. We are told in connexion with sacrifice that the blood is the life. In the Passover the blood of the lamb is sprinkled on the doorposts and lintels of the homes of the Israelites. This strengthened the doorway to repel the destroyer who otherwise would have entered the home and slain the first-born as he did among the Egyptians.

What does the offering of the body and blood effect for us who partake? Scripture makes two answers to this. First, we are told in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, "This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins." We have four accounts of the Institution of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament and of these accounts the two primary ones are those in Mark and 1 Corinthians. The words "for the remission of sins" occur only in the account in Matthew. This suggests that they are an interpretation of the benefit of the Lord's offering for us. One of the good things the Lord bestows on us in the Eucharist is the forgiveness of our sins. For this our partaking of the Lord's body and blood avails us.

The second benefit is the conferring of eternal life, such that though we die yet shall we live. In the offering of the body and blood of the Lord his life and power are available to us for the forgiveness of our sins and for eternal life. It is in terms of offering or sacrifice that the Christian of the early Church understood this as possible.

You may say: "But all this is mythology," and may wish to convey by that remark that it is quite unreal. But is this what we should mean? When we say that this is unreal, do we not confess that it is not in terms which are familiar to us, that sacrifice as we recognized earlier is for us a relatively unknown institution? The fact that it is so unknown in our Western world does not mean that it is unreal.

There is another consideration. We have inherited a dislike of associating the material and the spiritual too closely. In the Eucharist the Christian visibly partakes of bread and wine. He says that he receives the body and blood of the Lord. He believes that in partaking he has forgiveness of sins and eternal life. How can he associate a spiritual thing like eternal life with material things like bread and wine, even by means of a middle term such as the body and blood of the Lord?

I shall not try to give a complete answer to this question. I shall, however, point to certain facts of experience. As an example of the association of material and spiritual, we may take body and soul. Yet to divide them effectively we would need an analysis "sharper than any two-edged sword."

The two are in close conjunction; they operate on each other intimately; and man has more than once regarded their severance as death, the end of himself. And yet if we are going to distinguish firmly between spiritual and material this is an obvious example with which to start. This analogy is no attempt to explain the problem of the relation of material and spiritual as a whole. It may, however, suggest that attempts to separate them into disconnected compartments deny their real continuity and the unity of which they form the parts.

There are two views which conflict with Christian teaching at this point. One admits the reality of both material and spiritual but does not allow for the continuity between them; the other denies the reality of the spiritual altogether. In contrast with these opinions Christianity maintains the reality of both and their interrelation in a larger unity, on other and more particular grounds of experience. As we have seen, Christians at a very early date began to formulate more precisely what were the benefits they received in the Eucharist. They mention forgiveness of sins and eternal life. They were not interested in constructing theoretical fictions, and we may suppose that they made these statements because they found in the Eucharist forgiveness of sins and newness of life. This is a matter of experience. We may hold that it was experience which led them to these statements and experience which led many others to embrace them.

This experience of many Christians of many centuries is important in another way. In discussing the body and blood of the Lord in the Eucharist as the food of immortality, you may think that I have gone out of my way to be controversial. I may have gone out of my way, but it was not in order to be controversial. We hear much about the reunion of the churches nowadays. If we are to come together we must understand our neighbours, how they believe and how they live the Christian life. If for so many of them the Eucharist is the food of immortality, it is no good regarding this belief and practice out of hand as so much superstitious nonsense.

When Scots and English get together, traditionally it is Church government that occupies them if they discuss religion. Yet there are other important matters where there are considerable differences of practice, if not belief, among Christians. There is, for example, a strong tradition of frequent Communion in England and, if I understand the Book of Common Prayer aright, any three parishioners of good standing may request a celebration of the Holy Communion on any day, due notice having been given, and this request must be granted them. In the Church of Scotland, if I am rightly informed, until recently the quarterly Communion was the practice, and the matter was very much under the control of the Kirk Session, which could refuse outright any request for more frequent Communion. You may on reflection decide that the Church of Scotland is right in this matter, but at least you must know how the other half of Britain believes and lives if the Church is again to become one in these lands.

But more is at stake than this. I referred just now to Christian experience

of the Eucharist as mediating forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Many thousands of Christians have built their belief and life in Christ on this. It has proved a way of forgiveness and of life for them. So it can be for each one of us.

We are given forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ. We need the continual renewal of these gifts; such is the condition of our humanity. We wage in Christ a continual war against sin and death. As we receive the body and blood of the Lord so we are strengthened in this warfare.

This life and strength has its consequences for us. We do many foolish and wrong things because we are afraid and think ourselves poorer than God has made us. God has given us the unsearchable riches of Christ. Need the man who has received the food of immortality do this or that weak or foolish thing? I would urge you, whenever you are tempted to do what your fears prompt you to do and you know to be wrong, to remind yourself that as you have partaken of his flesh and his blood so you have eternal life within you and your fears are vain and you are free of them.