

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector Scripture: John 6:53-59

“People of the Last Exodus”

Jesus boldly said “I am the Bread of Life.” Seven times in the Gospel of John, Jesus used this verb of being - describing His relationship to mankind. As Jesus proclaims “I Am” the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Gate, The Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the True Vine – He is telling the world that He is the One who fulfills everything that we need; that we need to have life and to continue to live. It is in union with Him that we receive the gift of eternal life. God told Moses to tell the people of the first Exodus that I AM, and Jesus tell us – the people of the last Exodus I AM – and we are freed from the bondage of sin and death.

Bread was seen as life sustaining, in fact, Jesus’ giving us this wonderful image of Himself as the “Bread of Life” is perfectly in harmony with Deuteronomy 8:3 which says: *“man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.”* The idea of Torah as bread was not a new idea to the first century Jew. Indeed, Jesus is saying that He is more than bread – He is the very Word of God. In fact in verse 60 of this chapter of John’s Gospel – Jesus proclaims *“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”* (John 6:63) BUT - when Jesus presents the idea of consuming His flesh and drinking His blood – that is a whole different story! *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”* (John 6:53-56)

And you know there were some who took these words quite literally – and were quite possibly repulsed by thoughts of cannibalism, saying *“How can this man give us His flesh to eat?”* (John 6:52) They just did not understand, as we can today, because we know the rest of the story; we know about the sacrifice on the cross; we know about His victory over sin and death and His glorious resurrection. They could only hear the words that were before them. Like the Pharisee Nicodemus – who came to Jesus in secret at night, at the risk of being discovered, asked Jesus to clarify His teaching about being born again to see the kingdom of God, saying *“How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?”* (John 3:4) We are indeed blessed because we can hear Jesus’ Words and connect the dots; we can connect the Sacrament of Baptism with new life, and we can connect bread and wine with Jesus’ precious Body and Blood.

Jesus gave us much further clarity toward this connection of the first and last Exodus in last week’s Gospel from John – verses that appear just before today’s Gospel - that indeed remind us of the people of Israel – their “fathers, the people of the first Exodus,” who ate manna in the wilderness. Manna was a blessing, a heavenly gift from God, - genuine “life giving bread” – that was found each morning, except for the Sabbath, and gathered for nourishment. You could not stockpile it – but received it as you needed it – a day at a time. It was like wafers sweetened with honey, and is often called the bread of angels. Jesus Christ is heavenly bread, genuine “life giving bread,” sent from the Father – to nourish and sustain believers. My brothers and sisters - Jesus is eternal life! Jesus is the ONLY way to eternal life!

It is ironic that when we think of the first Exodus – we think of unleavened bread, and then we think of the sacrifice of the lamb and the use of its blood. God commanded through Moses to

His people in the Book of Exodus that *"They shall eat the flesh that same night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs."* (Exodus 12:8) Then He instructed them of the saving grace - His saving power - through the blood of that lamb. He said: *"The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."* (Exodus 12:13) With a branch of hyssop – they were instructed to paint the doorposts of their homes with that blood, the blood of a spotless lamb – sacrificed so that they and their firstborn would be saved – saved by the blood of the lamb! Indeed – this is a connection that mankind must make to survive – eternally. The bread and the lamb became symbols of God's life giving power and saving grace – they became symbols of life itself – and were not to be messed with or corrupted.

God directed His people of the importance and sanctity of blood in His words from the book of Leviticus which say: *"It is a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwellings: you shall not eat any fat or any blood."* (Leviticus 3:17) In chapter 17 God continues: *"No person among you may eat blood, nor may any alien who sojourns among you eat blood."* (Leviticus 17:12) And further more God continues: *"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement."* (Leviticus 17:11)

There is a very powerful relationship between flesh and blood, and the importance and sanctity of each. That relationship is beyond the physical, much like Jesus with Father, and Both with the Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel reading, the Greek words used to tell us of that relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is "*meno*" μένω which means to *stay, to abide, or to remain* – it is about relationship. This authoritative and significant word describes for us the intimacy and security found in this awesome and deeply **personal** relationship. This same kind of personal relationship is offered to us – as believers of Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us: *"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."* (John 15:9-11) The Apostle John testified to witnessing the Holy Spirit covering the Lord Jesus, saying: *"I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him."* (John 1:32) Just as Jesus has life from the Father, and relationship in the Holy Spirit – we as believers have life and relationship because of Jesus.

Jesus explains it to us, but only true faith in Him makes it clear to us. He says: *"The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me."* (John 14:10-11)

The physical and spiritual relationship of flesh and blood becomes the means, the vehicle - for the people of the last Exodus, that would be you and me, who are spiritually fed by the flesh (body of Christ) and the blood of the Lamb – (His precious blood.) As we are fed by this life giving bread from heaven, and this life sustaining precious blood – we are given the precious gift of freedom from the bondage of sin and death. With faith and true repentance of our sins, we are set free and the penalty of them no longer applies. The price has already been paid by the one of whom John the Baptist said: *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29)

Like the people of the first Exodus – we don't always behave the way that we should, and we may disagree with one another and even God, and run off of the plan that God has for us – as they would often complain and wish that they were back eating leeks and onions by the Nile. Some might even follow the Israelites example and raise up idols that are put before God in their lives. We are not perfect – we fall down, but we have been given the means, the vehicle – through Jesus, to get back up again and be righted on the path for our lives. That means, that vehicle - is our repentance of our sins and our seeking His forgiveness – through what He did for us on the cross.

The difference between the people of the first Exodus and the people of the Last Exodus – is that as faithful believers of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior – we have the opportunity to share in a personal abiding fellowship with Almighty God - through His Holy Spirit. We have the opportunity to come to His table and be fed - with the holy assurance that we are receiving the spiritual Real Presence of Jesus Christ. It is in this that we are nourished and fed – with real spiritual food. Remember Jesus' words from John 6:56 *“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”* (John 6:54-56) Dear friends that is a promise you can take to the bank! It can never be devalued!

Each time we come together for Holy Eucharist – there is a prayer that we say together after Holy Communion. In it we pray: *“Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, and you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”* These words confirm our relationship and our life in Christ, as well as our being able to be fed by the spiritual food of His Body and Blood.

If you would – think of the words of the priest – after the breaking of the bread – proclaiming: *“Alleluia, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us!”* **Christ our Passover – The perfect Lamb of God - who gave His life for us – His body and His blood** - invites each one of us to be with Him – at the heavenly banquet. We do not have to paint our doorposts like the people of the first Exodus – we the people of the last Exodus only have to open our heart to Him – and then we may dine with Him. I will leave you with the words of Jesus, and the image that goes with those words from the Book of Revelation 3:20 in which Jesus is outside a door – that has no handle or doorknob. You know as well as me that He could blast through any door – but He won't force Himself, because He is a gentleman. Jesus waits, and says as an invitation to the whole world: *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”* I know that many here today have opened the door to their hearts and let Jesus in – an open door policy, if you will! If you haven't opened the door to Jesus – today would be a very good day to do so!

