

From the Pastor's Desk

Eating Divinity

The year is 90 AD. Imagine people gathered with friends and family in a temple where the goddess Isis is worshipped. During the service, an animal is sacrificed and a small portion is placed on the altar and burnt as a sacrifice to the goddess. Another portion is given to temple priests as a stipend for their services and the majority of the sacrifice is cooked and eaten by those assembled in worship. The leader of the assembly prays to Isis asking her to be present among them. What's more, because the animal was sacrificed to her, Isis is believed to have entered into the flesh of the animal, so when it is eaten, so is the goddess. When they conclude the meal, they are satiated not only with food, but their bellies are full of their goddess Isis. One author puts it this way:

In the ancient world, one thing these Mystery Religions offered was communion and even identity with some god. The way it was done was this. All the Mystery Religions were essentially passion plays. They were stories of a god who had lived and suffered terribly and who died and rose again. The story was turned into a moving play. Before the initiate could see it, he had to undergo a long course of instruction in the inner meaning of the story. He had to undergo all kinds of ceremonial purifications. He had to pass through a long period of fasting and abstention from sexual relationships. At the actual presentation of the passion play everything was designed to produce a highly emotional atmosphere. There was carefully calculated lighting, sensuous incense, exciting music, a wonderful liturgy; everything was designed to work up the initiate to a height of emotion and expectation that he had never experienced before. Call it hallucination if you like; call it a combination of hypnotism and self hypnotism. But something happened; and that something was identity with the god. As the carefully prepared initiate watched he became one with the god. He shared the sorrows and the grief; he shared the death, and the resurrection. He and the god became forever one; and he was safe in life and in death...

We must remember that those ancient people knew all about the striving, the longing, the dreaming for identity with their god and for the bliss of taking him into themselves. They would not read phrases like eating Christ's body and drinking his blood with crude and shocked literalism. They would know something of that ineffable experience of union, closer than any earthly union, of which these words speak.

William Barclay, "The Gospel of John", vol. 1, p. 221-222

Very truly I tell you, unless you eat (Greek: phago—meaning "consume or eat") the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat (the Greek is changed to: trogo—would be better translated "chew on" or "gnaw") 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 eat (again, trogo—"chew on" or "gnaw") of my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. John 6:53-56

It is a stretch to try and interpret the Greek “trogo” symbolically, so what do we make of these words? Are we delusional in thinking we are consuming the body and drinking the blood of Jesus Christ? Regarding the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord, the ELCA states: *In this sacrament the crucified and risen Christ is present, giving his true body and blood as food and drink . This real presence is a mystery. We are talking about the presence of the living Christ, knowing that death no longer has dominion over him. The how of Christ's presence remains as inexplicable in the sacrament as elsewhere* . Taken from the ELCA document “The Use of the Means of Grace”.

When people participated in the ancient Mystery Religions and ate the sacrificial meal, they did not think their bellies were filled with the flesh of their god. Rather, they believed they were filled with the divine presence or energy of their god that had attached itself to the food they ate, which was being digested and sent in their blood veins throughout the rest of their bodies.

The understanding of communion in these ancient religions is helpful to us. Most likely, the early church was familiar with their practices. Every Sunday we assemble and through prayer and song invite our crucified and risen Lord to be present with us. We believe Christ’s divine presence enters our meal of bread and wine. When we eat it, we are eating the mysterious divine presence of Jesus Christ. We feel it in our bellies and through the digestive process it is pumped into our blood veins and throughout our bodies.

Every part of our being is filled with the divine presence of Jesus Christ. Our minds question, “How can this be?” But, stop for a moment ... take a breath ... notice your abdomen rise up and down ... What is this invisible life force within you that enables you to breathe? In Holy Communion, the eternal life of Christ communes with this eternal life within us.

Our minds say, “I don’t understand.” We also don’t understand how plants turn sunlight into life. We may understand the photosynthesis process and see the green leaves, but we do not understand how it becomes life, yet it happens.

We see bread. We see wine. Because of his words and promises, these elements take on the divine life of Christ. We eat the bread/flesh of Christ and drink the wine/blood of Christ and enter Mystery. Food for the soul bringing *Love, Compassion, Forgiveness and so much more*.

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
He who eats this bread will live forever.* John 6:51

~PB