

We have been listening for several weeks to Jesus teaching the crowd about the bread of life. You will remember that the teaching began just after the miracle of the loaves and fish. The crowd had come looking for Jesus, even travelling to the other side of the lake. When they arrived, he warned them that they were looking for him just because they had had plenty to eat. He tells them that they had failed to recognise the sign. He criticises their lack of perception. They never really understood what he had done in the miracle of the loaves. They were only seeing with physical eyes but did not see with the eyes of faith. This distinction is important for the teaching he went on to give and that we have been listening to for the last few weeks.

In today's gospel he gives them the command to eat, telling them that the bread they are to eat is his flesh. I think we can appreciate why they ask, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" They were only thinking in literal terms; they couldn't see with the eyes of faith. I find it interesting that Jesus did not answer this question directly. In one sense, he doesn't have to answer their question because he had already told them that they failed to recognise the sign. They are asking the wrong question. They must get beyond physical appearances and see with the eyes of faith. To take them in that direction, Jesus pushes the idea of eating even further by telling them that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life and he will raise them up on the last day. After hearing this, I wonder if they were now beginning to understand what he was saying. I wonder whether they could read the sign and whether they were slowly seeing through the eyes of faith.

What about us, what do we understand? The clue is in the reference to raising up those who eat and drink. The early Christian community for whom the gospel was written, would no doubt have heard "raising up" as a reference to Jesus' resurrection. The reference to flesh and blood is then heard as a reference to his body broken on the cross and his blood shed. When we recognise this, then we are beginning to see with the eyes of faith. We are beginning to recognise the meaning of the sign. His flesh and blood is a sign of his love for the world, for all people, and for each of us. The command to eat his flesh and drink his blood is a command to be part of his love. In the first instance, this is about being loved by him and being drawn into his love for his Father. It is then about our loving Jesus and the Father in return. When we are caught up in this divine love, our eating his flesh and drinking his blood is also about loving others the way he loves them. His love is characterised by his willingness to die for others, so

that they can have life. This is what eternal life looks: it is to be caught up in a love that finds its own reward in giving to others.

I imagine that as we have listened over the past few weeks to Jesus' teaching, we have been just as confused as the crowd who first heard it. It has not always been easy to follow. But perhaps it is more important to live the teaching than to fully understand it. Or maybe a better way to say this is to say that we only fully understand this teaching when we live it in our daily life. We live it by our participation in the Eucharist and our receiving holy communion. We eat his flesh and drink his blood each time we receive holy communion. Remember his promise: those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life. In saying this he reminds us that this gift of communion prepares us for the future. That future is to share in God's life. But more than that, our receiving communion now means that we are already tasting the future prepared for us, and we are already living in the company of God.

Our receiving holy communion shapes the way we live now. We are sent from Mass with the command to go and announce the gospel, or to glorify God with our lives. With the flesh and blood of Christ dwelling in us, we are empowered to love like he loves, with a love that does not count the cost. In this way, we bring the gift of eternal life to those we meet. This is not just to our friends and acquaintances, but also to those lives we touch when we reach out in charity to the needy. In this way, we become the sign for today of the flesh and blood of Christ. We eat his flesh and drink his blood in the sacrament in order that we might become his flesh and blood in reality to those around us.