

Eating Flesh

Several years ago, back east with the east coast family, I joined my still Roman Catholic sisters for Christmas Eve Midnight Mass.

The priest looked like he was pretty new, and his homily, which went on for a very long time, was all about how, if we only knew, *really* knew, what he was about to do with the bread and wine on the altar, if we only knew, *really* knew, what it was going to become, why, our hair would stand on end, we might faint, and there certainly wouldn't be any sleeping that night.

The focus of his talk was all about something ordinary becoming something holy.

Which is undoubtedly true, as far as it goes.

We Anglicans also believe that in the Eucharist, bread and wine become, truly, yet also inexplicably, the body and blood of our Lord.

But in today's gospel lesson, something far more scandalous is afoot.

Today, we have the story not of the ordinary becoming holy, but of the holy becoming ordinary.

John's entire gospel wrestles with the mind numbing news of the holy becoming ordinary....and thus "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

That's something that they then and we now have trouble wrapping our collective head around.

How can the holy Word of God become an ordinary human being?

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus begins his ministry in his hometown, when he opens up the scroll to the Prophet Isaiah and reads, to everyone's delight, about the time of the Lord come near, when the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame leap - it's all fine and dandy -- until Jesus says: "The time is now, the day is here!"

Well, next thing you know, they're trying to throw him off a cliff.

It seems we're often most comfortable when the holy is far away, in those outer reaches where we can pay some respectful lip service before getting back to the blood, sweat and tears close at hand.

Yet John's constant refrain is that right here -- in the very mess of our blood, sweat and tears -- right here is the holiness of God.

And people then and people now say: "No way!"

And so it is in John's gospel today.

Jesus can't be the holy one for one simple reason: he's ordinary!

We know his folks.

We know his family.

We know where he works.

We watched him grow up!

Case closed.

Because everyone knows that while the ordinary might become holy (see, for example, the slaughtered animals sacrificed in

Jerusalem's temple) – everyone knows that the holy cannot become ordinary.

And for good reason.

As long as the holy cannot become ordinary, we can treat what is ordinary; like each other, like this earth, like our oceans, like our animals; we can treat it all as we wish.

The horrific killings in Colorado, and just last week at the Sikh place of worship in Wisconsin, the burning of the Muslim mosque in Missouri: these are only more extreme examples of where we end up when we insist that the holy cannot become ordinary.

Only the holy deserves our respect; our awe; our reverence.

And since what is holy is far away, a distant not quite real spiritual thing; we can get by with lip service to the holy while, in our name, mother earth is pillaged for oil and gas, the ocean becomes the world's open sewer and animals are slaughtered with an industrial efficiency that boggles the mind – and it's all fine – because the ordinary is just so, well, so ordinary.

But if the holy indeed becomes ordinary, then the gig up.

If the holy becomes ordinary, then suddenly nothing is really ordinary anymore.

If the holy becomes ordinary, what is ordinary, like you and me and everyone else on this planet; like the earth and its treasures, like the animals and oceans, all of these ordinary things must also be holy.

And the distance that keeps us safe from the holy is now vanishing; the holy is in our midst, suffused in everything we see, everyone we touch, in every bit of creation.

This is the great convulsion that Jesus brings – no wonder we kill him with such relish; no wonder we nail him to a tree so quickly.

Because -- if the ordinary is now holy, whom can we hate, whom can we refuse to forgive, whom can we kill?

If the ordinary is now holy, how can we separate lives lived on Sundays from lives lived Monday through Saturday?

This is what Jesus may be getting at when he tells us today that “whoever believes *has* eternal life.”

Not “whoever believes *will have* eternal life,” but “whoever believes *has* eternal life:” *now, today, this moment!*

If you can see everything around you as holy; from the wino on the bus stop bench in front of the church to our glorious stained glass made by Tiffany to the gal or guy seated in front of you to the jerk who cut you off in traffic to the parent or children who are driving you crazy, to the cows in the field and the grass in that same field; if you can come to believe that all of these and everything else is indeed bathed in holiness; overflowing with God; then you my friend, have already stepped through the door of eternal life.

It's a narrow door to be sure because so much of our being insists that the holy is far away and out of touch.

But if you ask for the grace, that narrow door is opening right in front of you, right now, inviting you not only to take a glimpse, but inviting you in; all the way in.

Paul was given the grace to see the holy suffused in every ordinary thing.

It's the heart of his entire ministry.

It's the source of his patient advice to be "kind to one another; tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God through Christ has forgiven you."

For this is the way of God: not vengeance or punishment or retribution; but gentleness, tenderness, and more often than not, a really good joke!

In these is the true power that sustains all that exists.

In Jesus, the holy becomes ordinary flesh; flesh for your belly and mine; and in this flesh is the life of the world.

+amen