

Yesterday, I was talking with someone about the difficult verse we looked at a few months ago, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life within you” (John 6:53). We sing it happily in that wonderful communion hymn, “I am the bread of life” and each time I wonder if we should omit that verse, or whether that would be cherry picking the words of Christ. It does seem very exclusionary which contradicts our understanding of a God who is unconditionally loving and wants nothing more than to be in close, intimate, mutual relationship with every one of us.

Today we celebrate All Saints Day and we remember with a mixture of joy and sadness those who have died in the faith of Christ. Joy because we believe that they are now seeing God in a new and much closer way and that held in God’s loving embrace they are becoming fully the free and joyous beings we are all made to be, but sadness because they are our people and they are no longer here. When I think about those whom I have known and loved who have died, I wonder how many of them were saints. How many of them were people of faith? I don’t know for sure. If I’m in doubt should I include them in the list of names to be read today?

Take Auntie Myrtle. She was my mother’s dear friend. I think I was told that her husband had been a priest, and I’m pretty sure she went to church. She was the first person I knew who died. I remember I liked her perfume and I was always glad to see her. Was she a saint? Probably, but I can’t be sure.

Christianity often seems to be built on exclusivity. We saints are in the club, and the rest are just poor heathens whom we need to convert or else to pity. But I think that is a terrible distortion of Jesus’ teaching. After all, he spent time with the outcasts of his society and he was himself the ultimate outcast. He became the cosmic scapegoat – the one who was betrayed and denied by his friends, mocked and accused by his people and then killed as an insurgent by the occupying forces. We follow an outcast... who are we to dare to exclude?

But I think there’s a difference between excluding, and rejoicing in our path and our calling as the saints of God. If we aren’t excited about our experience of God then why should anyone else care? In fact, when we are excited we’re far more likely to include other people because our hearts are full of the abundance of God’s love, than when we’re discouraged and scared and think there really isn’t enough to go round. That’s when we fall into the very human trap of bolstering our own sense of security by excluding other people.

And we have plenty to be excited about. Just look at our readings for today.

They are all about hope. Our hope that there will come a time when God invites us to the great banquet and all the pain and the death we experience so often will be completely wiped away. We will sit down with radical Islamic fighters, and communists, and Soviets and people who look quite different from us and we will eat together the meal that God has prepared for us. What a wonderful image of peace and conviviality and joy. But notice that this isn’t an exclusive image... it doesn’t say “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all Christians a feast...” or even “on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all Christians and good Jews a feast” but “on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast.”

The psalm tells us that all who have “clean hands and a pure heart” will receive God’s blessing, and in Revelation the new civilization, the new heaven and earth where God dwells among mortals doesn’t mention rules about who can live there and who can’t.

Aren’t these wonderful images! A banquet on the top of the mountain, a new heaven and a new earth where we dwell tangibly with God, and above all an end to sorrow, pain and death. That is our hope.

And of course, each one of us longs like Lazarus to hear Christ’s words to us “Come out!” Come out from whatever is keeping you trapped, whatever is holding you down, whatever is denying you life. Come out! There is life in Jesus.

Today we are baptizing Jo and we are in that symbolic act indicating that she is passing from the old life caught up in sin to the new life in Christ that she shares with the saints. We will be joining with the Holy Spirit in marking her as Christ’s own for ever - one of those who is enrolled with us in the project of making the reign of God a reality, of living as though God’s word is really true!

We are delighted that Jo has heard Christ’s call to Come out! And we celebrate her new life in Christ and her entry into the household of saints.

But is this an exclusionary act? Are we, by proclaiming the communion of Saints and by baptizing new Christians, excluding others or saying that we alone have the true way to God?

I don’t think so. I think God is bigger than all human systems of thought. There are many different lenses and there are many different paths and we can learn from them all. But we have been called to be disciples of Christ and it is to us that his words are addressed, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life within you.” If we don’t follow the path to which we have been called and upon which we have started, we will become lifeless. Because it is in Jesus Christ that we find life. It is in Jesus Christ that we are blessed with hope. It is in Jesus Christ that we find the path to a life of deep connection with Spirit.

Let us have the courage of the saints of old, to stay the path, to gnaw upon the humanness of Christ and to drink his life force and to hold firm the hope that one day in the coming reign of God, all humanity will be united in joy and plenty.

Amen.