

John 6:35-60

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[0 : 00] When it comes to food, we've all got different tastes, haven't we? But there are some things that are universally revolting to eat.

! People laugh, don't they? If you watch that trashy TV programme, I'm a celebrity, get me out of there. We laugh, don't we, at celebrities as they take the challenge to eat and chew and bite and swallow nasty things, insects and grubs and stuff.

It's revolting, isn't it? And yet, perversely entertaining. I wonder what your nightmare dish is, that if you were served it, you'd have to politely decline.

Jesus brings a dish out of the kitchen that would make any bush tucker challenge look like a dream. It is a dish that is universally difficult to swallow. And it's very, very hard to keep down. It is an acquired taste. Let's have a paper dish.

This is great. It's a bit of a drink. It's so good. It is an acquired taste. But once you've eaten it, and once you've received it, you will never want anything else.

[1 : 20] Do you remember where we are in John's Gospel? Jesus has just fed the 5,000. And Jesus has steered the conversation onto the subject of food, hasn't he?

We're looking at the bread of life discourse here. And he agrees that human beings need physical food to live, and he's just met that need in a miraculous way.

But more importantly, he says, you and I need another longer-lasting kind of food, which only he can give. I am the bread of life, he claims. And he's going to carry on unpacking what that means. And in our passage today, he describes the meal in more detail. He describes what he is going to produce to give us eternal life.

It's like the chefs do, isn't it, as they describe their dishes. I'm going to cook panseed salmon on a bed of celeriac puree with samphire and a lemon sauce. But it is not at all like that, is it?

[2 : 25] What he is about to serve is something that seems utterly revolting to us. It's shocking. Look at verse 51 again in your Bibles.

I am the living bread. Look at the end of verse 51. And the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh. Gross.

He lifts off the colosh, doesn't he, off the plate. Voila. But it's not the dish we at all expected. It's not the meal we imagined or asked for.

And we politely decline. No thank you, Jesus. That is how the disciples respond in verse 60, isn't it? This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?

Who can stomach the food that Jesus gives? Who can stand to eat at Jesus' dining table? And I think this is probably our last week in John's Gospel for a little while.

[3 : 29] We'll take a break from it in the next few weeks. But I want us to see two things here. I want us to see what is actually on the dinner plate of this food that brings eternal life.

And secondly, why it is so hard for us to swallow what is on the dinner plate. So first of all, what is Jesus serving? What is on the dinner plate? Jesus says that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

And the big question, of course, is, is Jesus some kind of cannibal? Is he saying that the disciples for this eternal life need to eat his literal physical body?

Kind of slice a piece off his leg and cook it and eat it? That idea is repulsive to us, isn't it? And that seems to be what some of his audience think he means.

That's what they say in verse 52. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? It's a really good question. It's a revolting thing, isn't it? It's a hard thing. Commentators and theologians have argued for two kind of main ways to understand what Jesus is saying here.

[4 : 42] Some think that Jesus is speaking metaphorically. He's using picture language. He's using figurative language. Others think that he's talking about the church sacrament of communion.

Where Christians eat bread and wine, symbolising his body and blood. And I think the answer lies somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, I want to say to you that primarily, I don't think Jesus here is speaking about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Primarily. I don't want to get too technical with you. But the context of John 6 just doesn't lead to that natural reading at all. And one of the big reasons that I say that is that eating this flesh, whatever that means and we'll come to it, absolutely and unquestionably leads to eternal life.

That's what Jesus says. Verse 50. This bread that comes down from heaven, if you eat it, the one who eats it will not die. That is an absolute, unambiguous, categorical promise, isn't it?

In other words, people who don't eat this flesh will die. And those who do, won't die. But when you look at the rest of the teaching of the New Testament on the sacrament of communion, that categorical, absolute promise of life is not made.

[6 : 18] It is possible to take communion if you go to church and not have eternal life. And on the flip side, there are people who have come to Jesus and received eternal life from him, who've not taken the Lord's Supper and have not had the chance to do that.

Now that is not normal, is it? That is very rare for that to happen, but it is possible. So Jesus is not talking primarily about the Lord's Supper here.

The Apostle John, he doesn't mention the Lord's Supper at all here. And if he was talking about that, it would be easy for Jesus to clear up the misunderstanding in a word, wouldn't it?

He's saying, you must eat my flesh as part of a sacrament. But he doesn't do that. So that is not the subject that he's on. If you want to talk with me about that afterwards, I'd be really, really delighted to kind of pick that open with you if you're not clear.

The context of John 6 shows that Jesus has a wider, more fundamental dining experience in mind. He is not thinking about you just going to church and having some bread and some wine, and that in itself giving you this life that he speaks of.

[7 : 38] He's talking about the more basic action of taking this life that he gives by faith. Think about it. Up until now, Jesus has already described this process.

He's used words like coming to him, in verse 35, and believing and receiving. And so eating is another way, it is a richer way of describing that same thing.

What he's asking for here is not that you go through some ritual as if that in itself could give you life. He's asking that you believe and hope in him for this life.

Don't get me wrong. It is true, isn't it, that the sacrament of communion is given and it's commanded by Jesus for his people. He commands us to take bread and wine.

But that command is to help us to do what he's asking us to do here in John 6, without bread and wine. It is a means to help us feed on Christ by faith and to trust in him, and that is the most important thing.

[8 : 48] And so we can receive by faith what we are given in the sacraments without receiving the sacraments.

So this is really important, isn't it, for those of us who are maybe just going through the motions, and we are going to church, if that's you, and we see the importance of communion.

But maybe you are thinking that the bread and the wine, in and of itself, will give you eternal life. And it becomes, doesn't it, a kind of superstitious magic.

Doing communion, actually without doing what he's saying here in John 6, without trusting in Jesus, you're not actually receiving this food at all. You are eating physically, but not by faith.

And you've missed the point of what Jesus is commanding here, and actually you've missed the point of communion. To eat him is to come to him and believe in him and trust in him for life.

[9 : 51] And he tells his listeners to start doing that right now. Even before a single grape has been fermented, or a single grain of wheat has been milled.

And you can do that now. Even though we have no bread and no wine in this meeting. To eat his flesh is an act of faith of receiving him.

And so, we kind of breathe a bit of a sigh of relief, maybe, don't we? Surely that takes the offence out of what Jesus is telling us to do. Phew.

We're not talking about cannibalism. We're not talking about some empty ritual. We are talking about spiritual eating by faith. So, we're in the clear.

But, John is adamant that what Jesus is saying here is difficult to swallow. If you read on in John, immediately after this passage in chapter 6, some of Jesus' followers, who've been with him all the way, at this precise point, decide that they can't carry on with him.

[11:05] A line has been crossed. And they can't stomach Jesus. They can't swallow what he is serving. The food that gives life is too challenging for them to eat.

I'm a disciple of Jesus. Get me out of here. So, we ask, why? What really is the problem here?

We've seen what Jesus is serving.

But why is it hard to swallow? Well, if you're reading through John's Gospel, you might get stuck on something like this. It is a section where it's difficult, isn't it, to know what Jesus is saying.

But actually, there is a section in John's Gospel that has all of the answers to the puzzles. It's like the page at the back of a crossword book, isn't it, that has all the answers.

Except John's answer page is at the front of his book. It's what we call the prologue. It's the first 18 verses of the Gospel. And pretty much everything in the whole Gospel is there in seed form in the first 18 verses.

[12:13] You might want to turn there. It's good to know, isn't it, that Jesus is on the readers, John is on the reader's side. And he gives you the answers to the puzzles before you get to the puzzles.

So what do we learn about this word flesh? What is Jesus talking about when he says, eat my flesh? Well, flesh, in John's Gospel, to make the point again, it is never used, or anywhere else in fact in the New Testament, in talking about the Lord's Supper, communion.

The word body is used, but not the word flesh. John has something else in mind. You might remember John on his answer sheet, in verse 14, says, the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we've seen his glory.

He's talking about the Son of God becoming a human being. The incarnation. The fleshification of God, if you like.

He's talking about God becoming a man. And so flesh, for John, is a word that describes the Son of God and his humanity.

[13:28] It describes the totality of Jesus' human existence. It's flesh and blood. It's flesh and blood like we have flesh and blood. And so Jesus is saying in John 6, I am going to give my human life, my flesh and blood, to you, in sacrifice.

And it's that sacrifice that you have to accept and receive, that you have to chew on. There is an unsavoury stench about this dish and in Jesus' kitchen, but it's not the stench of cannibalism.

It is the stench of death. It's actually much worse, isn't it? A little earlier in the conversation, John tells us that the day of the Passover festival was coming up.

And on that day, the Jews remembered how God rescued them from slavery in the land of Egypt through the death of a substitute of a lamb.

God told the people to sacrifice a lamb to kill it and then to eat the lamb before being led into new life. It's interesting, isn't it? It wasn't enough for the lamb to be killed as a substitute.

[14:45] They had to take it in. They had to eat the lamb and apply the death to themselves. They had to watch as a lamb would have been killed in each household and then eat that dead lamb.

They had to consume the dead lamb. And so Jesus says all of this with that in the background. Eating Jesus' flesh is to take into yourself his death.

It is to accept and trust in his death and to live in response. If you were at the carol service a few weeks ago, do you remember we heard the angels telling the shepherds the sign of who this king, who this saviour was going to be to find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Do you remember? A manger literally means feeding trough. It is not an accident that when the Son of God takes on flesh, the first place that he fills in this world, when his feet touch the ground, the first place that he is in the world is in a feeding trough.

It illustrates the point, doesn't it, that Jesus says to us, I've taken on flesh in my birth to be food for the world in my death.

[16:14] As you walk down the street, I love the poetry of the fact that there is a shop in Ealing that sells bread that has the same word in its title that is used to show the shepherds where to get the living bread.

Manger, isn't it? Pret a manger. Pret a manger. It means, in the French, ready to eat. Every time you walk past it, remember.

Manger, and think of Jesus. The one who comes to be food for your life in his death. My three-year-old son, one of the ways of getting in to eat something is to shape it into something that is attractive.

So we found these cereal bites that are shaped as letters, and he loves them. Alpha bites. Or there's alphabet spaghetti, isn't there? Or there's pom bears.

Or there's animal biscuits. And kids love fun-shaped food. But the problem with the food that Jesus offers us, it's not fun-shaped, is it?

[17 : 21] It's cross-shaped. And it has the smell of death about it. And as we look at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as we see his humanity butchered, and his life draining away, and his blood literally draining out of him, God is saying to us, voila, dinner is served.

And this is the only way that you are going to live. This is the only way to live. It is to accept his death.

And to consume the death of Jesus, and to live in accordance with it. And so, what is so unpalatable for the disciples, and for those who leave them, is that they begin to realise that Jesus' food is not fun-shaped.

It's cross-shaped, and it's death-shaped. Preacher Spurgeon said that there are no crown-wearers in heaven that are not cross-bearers on earth.

And that is why it's so hard to swallow, isn't it? Those who end up leaving Jesus in John 6, they love a Jesus who gives them bread. They've been with him up until this point.

[18 : 40] They've followed him. They've travelled across the Sea of Galilee to get to him. They love that Jesus. They love a Jesus who gives them life. But they don't love a Jesus who dies.

They don't love a Jesus who calls them to follow in his footsteps. But the Christian life is lived, cross-shaped food.

Of trusting in Jesus' cross, and of taking up ours. Self-denial of service, and of submission to Christ. And maybe that is why, if you're honest, that is why, if you're honest, some of you here today might say, that is it.

That is the line that I won't cross. I can't go any further with Jesus. Because I see now that Christianity stinks of death.

Paul says to the Corinthians that those who are perishing, Christians, and the Christian message is the stench of death.

[19 : 49] But he says to those who are being saved, Christians, and the Christian message, are the aroma of life. And this is true life, Jesus says.

But if you're prepared to swallow it, verse 55 he says, This flesh is true food. It is true drink. And whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.

He says, doesn't he, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And whoever would save his life would lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it.

You will live. It is the paradox of the gospel, isn't it? That true life is ironically found in the death.

So Jesus is calling you this afternoon. He calls you to receive and to trust the death of the Lamb.

And going forward, if you are a believer, he gives you church sacraments to aid you in doing that.

[21 : 00] But he says to you, don't wait until that moment. Do it now. Accept that you need Jesus and his death. And feed off him by faith in your hearts.

And eat and live by this cross-shaped food. Let's pray. Let's pray.