

## The Body and Blood of Christ

***Jesus said to the Jews: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world...Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.***



John 6, 51-58

About the mid 1800s, the materialistic, humanist philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach posited: "A man is what he eats." Feuerbach actually believed that human beings are no more than what they eat and that there is no place in our lives for the spiritual, the cultural or the imaginative. We are all about what we eat and nothing more.

However, let's not dismiss Feuerbach too quickly, for there's much more than a grain of truth in what he says. Nutritionists and medical researchers tell us that western society is in the midst of an epidemic of obesity. The fact that a whole industry has grown up around healthy diet and exercise, with fitness centres springing up everywhere and more and more people engaging personal trainers to monitor their fitness levels, is proof positive that we are beginning to look carefully at what we eat and drink. What's more, the global financial crisis whose effects are still being felt in many economies demonstrates that wanton consumerism wrought havoc in the lives of countless numbers of ordinary people who regarded themselves as financially secure. People in the western world have shown that they have insatiable appetites not only for food and drink, but for fossil fuels, for the newest and latest electronic gadgetry, for whatever feels good, entertains or provides instant gratification. We eat, we consume, we use, and we discard the leftovers, often indiscriminately. Moreover, what we consume can, in turn, swallow us up - be it our status, our career, our home, our sophisticated toys our computers. Indeed, there is some truth in Feuerbach's statement: "We are what we eat."

Let's hold that while we shift our focus to something St. Augustine said when he preached a sermon on Eucharist in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century (Sermon 57, "On the Holy Eucharist"): "Through our participation in the sacraments, particularly Baptism and Eucharist, we are transformed into the Body of Christ, given for the world." Augustine went on to say that a priest or Eucharistic minister would do well to say to each person coming to the altar to receive communion: "Behold what you are! Become what you receive!" - in other words, "Look, you are the body of Christ! Become the body of Christ given as nourishment for your world!"

St. Augustine's message is that participation in Eucharist is meant to transform us into what we receive - the Body of Christ, broken and given and the Blood of Christ poured out for our own nourishment and the nourishment of our broken and needy world.

In his account of the Last Supper, Mark describes how Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples. By participating in Eucharist, we present ourselves to be transformed into bread for our world - bread that is taken, blessed, broken and given for others. In his book *Life of the Beloved*, the Dutch Catholic priest and theologian, Henri Nouwen makes much of those words - taken, blessed, broken and given - and their significance for us as Christians as we link what we do in our churches on Sundays to the rest of our living.

We know that we are all “taken” or chosen or claimed by a God who has loved us into life. In a world which is very competitive, in which we are often manipulated and pushed to jockey and compete for position, power and promotion, we can easily forget that we are chosen by God. When we make unhealthy choices and decisions, we can slip into self-doubt and self-hatred. Yet we have been chosen by God to be food for our world.

Nouwen goes on to tell a moving story about the importance of *blessing* in our lives. The English word “blessing” is derived from the Latin *benedicere* whose literal meaning is to speak well of others. Every single one of us has a need to be spoken well of, to be affirmed for who we are, as much as for anything we have done or achieved. When he retired from teaching, Nouwen took on the role of live-in chaplain to a L’Arche community of people with emotional, physical and intellectual disabilities in Toronto, Canada. One day, a community member by the name of Janet asked Nouwen for a blessing. Without paying much attention, he traced the sign of the cross on Janet’s forehead. “No”, the young woman protested, “I want a real blessing!” So he promised her that, the next time they gathered for prayer, he would give Janet a real blessing. When the prayer had concluded, Nouwen announced to the community that Janet had requested a special blessing and he invited her to come forward. This she did with great eagerness. She stepped forward, locked her hands around his waist and put her head on his chest. He responded by saying: “Janet, I want you to know that you are God’s beloved daughter. You are precious in God’s eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things that you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a special person, deeply loved by God and by all the people who are here with you.” When Janet looked up with a broad smile, Nouwen knew that she had heard and understood the blessing he had given her. He was about to leave when another young woman in the community put her hand up and asked for a blessing, too. That started a dam-burst, and before long everyone in the community was lining up for a blessing. However, Nouwen said that the most moving part of the experience for him came at the very end when a volunteer carer, a 24 year-old big, strapping footballer said: “And what about me?” He stepped forward and received this blessing: “John, it’s so good that you are here. You are God’s beloved son, and your presence here is a gift to all of us. When things are tough and life is difficult, always remember that you are loved with an everlasting love.” John looked up with tears in his eyes and replied: “Thank you. Thank you very much.”

This simple story is a reminder that things like gossip, blame, criticism and finger-pointing don't bring life to anybody. But knowing that we are blessed means that we can go through life blessing others with kindness, encouragement and respect.

So we are chosen and blessed, but also broken. We all know fear, rejection, loneliness, disappointment, failure, shame and grief - from the inside. And we all face death which Nouwen calls "the most radical form of brokenness." Accepting and learning to live with our brokenness is an integral step in the lifelong journey of coming to trust ourselves to the care of an ever-loving God. And we can take courage from the fact that Jesus allowed himself to be broken for us and for our world. Finally, in the Eucharist, we are invited to give ourselves for others. We know from experience that we are our best selves when we are prepared to give of ourselves, however insignificant that may seem. A smile, a hug, a word of encouragement, a helping hand, a listening ear all have the power to transform others, to breathe life them.

Every time we participate in Eucharist, we are invited to allow ourselves to be chosen, blessed, broken and given for others. Dare we accept the invitation? Becoming what we eat can be a dangerous business.