

The Food That Gives Life.

A Sermon delivered at Union Chapel, Manchester, on Sunday Morning, August 3rd, 1902, by

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"He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me."—John vi. 57.

Familiarity and mental indolence leaden to us the sense of the strangeness of these strange words. Try to hear them with the ears of the people in the little synagogue at Capernaum, many of whom had yesterday seen the miracle of the multiplied loaves. Strange and repulsive as words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood must have sounded to these original hearers, they would dimly gather that in them there were stupendous claims, that the Speaker arrogated to himself the power to satisfy the hunger of every soul, the power, in some mysterious way, to enter into the personality of a man, and there to confer an immunity from death. Think of a man talking like that to other men, and think of a religious teacher giving utterance to such words, which would strike many a hearer as being compounded as in about equal parts of absurdity and blasphemy. "As the living Father hath sent me," and "I live because of the Father," even so "he that eateth Me—e teth Me!—shall live because of Me." No wonder that they said, "He blasphemeth." Yes; and yet nineteen centuries have proved that it was all true.

Now notice—

I.—THE FOOD

Jesus Christ begins by saying, "I am the Bread of Life." And there we come full up against the characteristic, the *differentia* of his teaching; viz., that his main subject is himself. The Jews were quite right when they laid their fingers on that as the peculiarity of his words: "Thou bearest witness of thyself," though they were quite wrong when they drew the conclusion, "therefore thy witness is not true." But here, we see, in its most conspicuous form, that which runs through the whole of our Lord's words to the world, and makes them quite unlike any other man's words, viz., that whilst he has much to say about God, and about humanity, he has more to say about himself, and yet, in his sayings about himself is always revealing God to searching man, and, that so his personality, and not his teaching merely, is what men are to partake of. He does not come to us saying, "Believe what I tell you about God; believe what I tell you about yourselves; believe what I tell you about sin or duty; believe what I tell you about the future and the life beyond the grave;" but he says, "Believe in me." And that is either the very insanity of diseased self-consciousness, or it is—what? I leave you to fill up the alternative. I fill it up with, "God, who at sundry times, and in divers manners spoke unto the Fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son."

Then, we come to this, that according to our Lord's own self-consciousness, you cannot deal with his teaching in its relation to his personality as you can deal with all other teachers' teaching. It does not matter a bit to me what kind of a man Plato was. That has nothing to do with my understanding of the "Phædo." It does not matter to me what any other guides of the human race have been, in regard to their characters and inner lives. I take their words, and do not care about them, if I have got their words. But you cannot read in two the indissoluble unity, Jesus Christ's personality and Jesus Christ's teaching. The one is naught, I was going to say, without the other. Certainly there is small force in his teaching if you divorce it from himself. What, then, does he arrogate to himself, or rather, what, then, does he reveal to us as being stored in himself, when he calls himself the "Bread of God which came down from Heaven," and bids us eat him that we may live? Surely, to put it in the briefest and boldest way. He is asserting that for all the hungers of the human spirit, he and he alone is the all-sufficient food. My mind hungers for truth, my heart for love, my will for an authority to which it is blessed to bow, my conscience for something that will at once ease it of its pain and sharpen its delicacy of perception; and my desires, my hopes, my fears, my longings, and all the commonwealth within, hunger for their appropriate satisfaction. All of these diverse capacities, mind, heart, will, conscience, desires—they all may find, not in his teaching only, but in himself, that which will satisfy them. He whose mind has fed on Christ knows him to be the incarnate truth. He whose will has fed on Christ knows him to be the authoritative law-giver whose law is love, and is a delight to obey. He whose conscience has fed on Christ knows him to be the power that takes away from it all its sting, and teaches it loftier and more penetrating judgments as to what is duty and right. He whose desires have fed on Christ knows that in him, and in him only, there is for every one of them a rest which is not an illusion, a food which is not satiety.

And so, brethren, he who is the sufficient food for one man is therefore declared to be the sufficient food for the world. To each of us that dear Lord, in the depths of his life, in the heights of his majesty, in the greatness

of his authority, in the clearness of his revelation, may be "human nature's daily food," partaking of which we may live for ever.

But let me remind you that there is a special direction given, to this wonderful discourse of our Lord's, to the general thought. For whilst Jesus began by saying to his hearers in the synagogue, "I am the Bread of Life," He went on to a more solemn and mysterious thing, and spoke of "my flesh" as "meat indeed," and "my blood" as "drink indeed." I have said that we must advance from the teaching to the personality. Aye, and we must do more than that. We must do what a great many people today do not like to do, we must advance from the personality to the Cross. For the general expression, "I am the Bread of Life," is expanded, or rather it is expounded, into "My flesh is meat, and my blood is drink." And my text, "He that eateth me," is, in like manner, explained by, "He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood." Now, brethren, people who hold more sacramentarian views about the Lord's Supper than I suppose most of us do, are fond of saying that this chapter is the exposition of the meaning of the "sacrament." Yes! It is the exposition of the meaning, but the chapter and the rite stand on the same level. The one teaches by symbol what the other teaches by words. The one is an emblem, the other is a metaphor, and the emblem and the metaphor, the rite and the sermon, both point to the same thing, and that is the death which separated the flesh from the blood, and, in that great sacrifice, made his personality the life of the whole world.

So we have to come not merely to the Christ the Teacher, not merely to the Christ the Revealer, but to the Christ crucified, who in his death has become for us the Bread of Life. I do not need to dwell, I suppose, upon the fact that wherever that last step is recoiled from, there you will get an incomplete, an impoverished, and, to a very large extent, an impotent Christianity. There are many of us who are quite willing to listen to him, and who, in some sort of fashion, do indeed feed upon Jesus Christ, but who shrink from eating the flesh and drinking the blood. And, ah! the life flows but scantily in their veins, and the Christ that they know is not the Omnipotent Christ, whom they know who have drunk in the power of his Cross, and so have become "partakers of the power of his resurrection." I beseech you to remember this, that Christianity in its depths can not survive unless from the broad saying: "I am the Bread of Life," it advances to: "My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." The food of the world is the Christ that died.

Secondly, we have here the eating; the process by which we take

II.—THE BREAD FOR OUR VERY OWN.

The metaphor, of course, is one familiar to us all. We use it when we mean to express acceptance of a truth, or participation in an experience. We talk, for instance, of "eating the bread of sorrow," "feeding on love," of "tasting joy," and the like. And what is meant when it is applied to our relation to Jesus Christ, the personal Christ, the Christ crucified? What is meant our Lord himself explains in other parts of this conversation. For whilst, in my text, he says, "He that eateth me, even he shall live by me," in another part of the discourse he says, "He that cometh to me shall never hunger"—there is one explanation, metaphorically, of course, of the "eating" and "he that believeth on me" there is an explanation of it not metaphorical—"shall never thirst." "Rating," "coming," "believing"—these are our Lord's explanations.

The same idea is suggested by noticing another remarkable parallelism in the discourse. For in one place in it, he says that "everyone that believeth on the Son may have everlasting life, and I will raise him up at the last day," and immediately before my text, he says: "Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." Thus, precisely the same things, viz., the present possession of everlasting life, and a future resurrection are predicted as being the consequences of "eating my flesh," and as "believing on him." That is to say, again we come round to the point from which I started, that the method by which a man makes his own, and incorporates into his very self, the personality of Jesus Christ, is the simple act of trust in him.

Now I do not need to dwell upon that, which is the familiar commonplace of our pulpits, but I wish I could lay upon the hearts of some of my friends, and on their minds, this great thought, that trust is more than credence, because there is only the work of the understanding, whilst to trust there is the outgiving of the heart; and that trust is more than credence, because credence only grasps a proposition or statement, and trust wraps its tendrils round a person. So the belief which brings Christ into my heart is not merely the acceptance of all that is said in Scripture about him, but it is the outgiving of my confidence towards him, and the resting of my whole self upon him. You may believe all that is said in the New Testament about Jesus Christ, and yet not believe in him about whom it is said. And so the eating is the making my very own of the personal Christ by

the simple act of putting out the hand of faith, grasping him, and trusting him, and cleaving to him. "He that eateth me shall live by me."

But there is one thing more to be said. The word that is employed here, and is rendered "eat," is the technical word for chewing the cud—ruminating. And that is the kind of eating that brings life—the meditative contemplation of the Christ that died and that lives, of the Christ who is my Christ, of the Christ whom I take into myself by my act of faith. In all this hurry of our modern life, and amidst all the controversies about religious, or at least, theological, subjects, it is very hard, and we all know that it is hard, to come to that kind of feeling. It is as much as some of us can do to snatch a hasty morsel now and then before we go out to our work. As to ruminating, we seem to be far too busy for that.

Meditation is pretty nearly a lost art in the Christian church, I am afraid; and that is one reason why there are so many weaklings, and so many shallow Christians amongst us. You cannot take in a landscape if you hurry it in a special train like a cheap tripper. How do you expect to take in Jesus Christ if you never make time to look at him? And how do you expect that "the Bread of God which come down from heaven" will nourish you, if you never chew it? Nobody ever goes to Niagara without saying, "My first impression was disappointment. You have to sit still, and sit, and sit, and look, and look. And then by degrees the greatness of the thing dawns on you. Lay out a piece of foul linen upon the grass and the daisies, and sprinkle it with spring water, and let the sun shine on it for ten minutes. It will not be much bleached. Let it lie there for a couple of days, and the whiteness will come. Lay something in a drawer, besides an aromatic substance, for a brief minute, and you will take it out as gullible of scent as when you put it in. Let it be there for a month or two, and when you withdraw it it is fragrant. Our Christian life will be vigorous in proportion as the initial act of taking Christ for our Saviour is kept up by the continuity of meditative feeding on him. We do not need to be always investigating so as to find out new truths. The attitude of mind in which a man searches for the confirmation of his belief, or for clearing up of his belief, or for additions to his belief, is entirely different from the attitude in which he makes the most, in his experience, of the things that he has long believed. And it is that mental exercise which I think is so little practised amongst Christian people to-day, to the great detriment of the vigor of their Christian life. "He that eateth me"—there must be continuous communion, if there is to be continuous drawing into myself of the life which comes through that communion. Yesterday's meal will do very little to stay to-day's hunger. Yesterday's fellowship with Christ will not bring new vitality for to-day.

One word to close in regard to

III.—THE CONSEQUENT LIFE.

"He shall live by me." That implies that apart from Jesus Christ, men are dead. And the very fact that our Lord here distinctly declares more than once in his conversation with the Jews in the synagogue, that apart from him they were dead, shows us that death and life, in this great conversation, do not mean either corporeal or spiritual existence, but that they mean respectively the state in which a man is separate from, and the state in which a man is that is united to, God in Jesus Christ. Apart from him, we may be vigorous in other departments of life, but we are dead whilst we live. Oh, dear friends, do not be deceived by the simulacrum of life which your busy occupation in regard to earthly things brings with it. You may be "diligent in business," and in many respects "fervent in spirit," and touch very high activities of many kinds, and yet in regard to your deepest personality you may be dead because you are separated, by alienation and negligence, from the personal Fountain of life.

The indwelling Christ will bring life. Surely that is the promise of the Gospel, and in this great gospel of John, all, and more than all, which Paul meant by righteousness is included in that one great word "life." And that indwelling life which is the true communication of the life of Christ himself, will work on and on, and outwards and outwards, until it permeates the whole mass of our human mortality and corruption. The Christ within us, who is within us through our faith, is like "the leaven that was hid in three measures of meal"—body, soul, and spirit, and will work transforming, and lightening the heavy mass "until the whole is leavened," and the grace that was first hidden in the heart has found its way to the finger-tips, and the whole man, body, soul, and spirit is "raised in glory," and in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

So in our context, as I have already pointed out for another purpose, we have twice repeated the connection between our present possession of the life eternal, and our raising by Christ himself, at the last day. "If the spirit of him that raised up Christ Jesus from the dead dwell in you," then your mortal bodies, too, will be quickened by that spirit, and we shall be partakers of his resurrection. Christ is the true Tree of Life. Let us put out a confident-handed faith and pluck the fruit. "Eat, and your souls," and your bodies, too, hereafter, "shall live for ever."—Baptist Times.