

Proper 16B – “But Jesus knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, “Do you take offense at this?” Jn. 6.61

Who is the person you find to be the most offensive? It may be a neighbor or your brother-in-law. It might be a foreign figure like Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein. It could be a local figure like a David Duke or Timothy McVeigh. Or it might simply be someone ridiculous who made their living insulting people like Don Rickles or Rodney Dangerfield. But it is rarely the case that a religious figure makes the list for “most offensive”. Occasionally someone like the Ayatollah Khomeini or Jimmy Swaggart will make the list.

But I think that it is safe to say that Jesus never makes the list of “most offensive people”. Notwithstanding the people that use his name as some kind of exclamation, most people here in the United States have a generally high view of Jesus. We are not unique in this. Around the world, and without regard to race or creed, the man Jesus is normally considered with approval and appreciation. This is not to say that there is general assent to his claims or that I believe that everyone is a Christian. I am not saying that. But my guess is that

there is general good will toward the man of Galilee who is known for his healing power, his wise words and his mild manner. He is, for many, the quintessential “good guy”.

But this is not the case as Jesus concludes his discourse with the Jews in Capernaum in the Gospel of John. For John writes, “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this?” Jesus’ words had completely lost the goodwill that he had won by feeding the multitudes upon the mountainside. Those who would have taken him by force and made him king now drift away in disgust. Jesus was no friend of theirs. He was an offense.

What was it that he had said that had offended them so? First of all he had made an outrageous claim by referring to himself as the Son of Man when he said, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.” The prophet Daniel was the one who foretold of the Son of Man when he wrote, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the

clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” Yes, Jesus had done amazing signs and wonders. Yes, he had healed the sick. But to claim for himself the title Son of Man was to claim kingship over the whole Creation!

But this was not all! No, Jesus had revised their most beloved history. It was in their Exodus from slavery in Egypt that they came to understand who God was and who they were. He had elected them to be his special people out of all the nations. He had released them from bondage and had met their every need as they crossed the wilderness to the Promised Land of Canaan. Foremost among these gracious signs was the shower of manna that fell every morning for forty years. Moses had given them this bread. Could Jesus do better? Jesus reminded them that Moses had not given them bread. His Father in heaven had given them the manna. Even so, he had sent Jesus down from heaven. The manna that their fathers had eaten was

common bread, in that it could never fulfill their cravings and in the end they all died in the wilderness. Jesus told them that true bread doesn't just sustain life, it gives life. And then to dispel all doubt Jesus concluded, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Jesus claimed to be the ultimate heavenly bread. But this is not simply about food. Jesus' claim meant that Moses, the Law, the Temple and the traditions had become obsolete. He was the only way to the Father and to eternal life. Now that's offensive! So, many of the Jews and his disciples went away in disgust. There were so many, in fact, that Jesus looked at the 12 and asked, "Do you also wish to go away?"

But let us look a bit closer and see why it was that so many took offense at Jesus' words. There is almost no way for us to appreciate the gravity of Jesus' words as they stood as criticism of Moses and the fathers as they wandered in the wilderness. We struggle to understand because we are Gentiles and have been grafted in to the vine which is Christ himself, and that late in time. Our forefathers were outside the grace and care of Almighty God, wandering in

ignorance and wickedness because he had not revealed himself to them. We find ourselves in a most blessed state because the good news of the Messiah came from the Jews and our fathers and mother's believed that message. But it is not so for the Jew. Instead as Paul says, their advantage is that, "They have been entrusted with the oracles of God," and, "to them belongs the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belongs the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Messiah." This is the greatest of honors that could be bestowed upon a race of men. They have received the attention, the love, and the correspondence of Almighty God. They had a proprietary interest in the Father's attention. But now Jesus says that relationship, though it came from heaven, is now obsolete. Jesus is the bread that gives life, not to the body but to the soul. Jesus is the bread that gives life to the whole world, not just one family in it. Jesus is the bread that gives life, not simply for a few years, but for all eternity.

Next, Jesus' words were offensive because he demanded that the crowds eat his own flesh and blood. We may add that before this claim could have been offensive, it was evidently ridiculous. The

crowds said, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Could they all sit down and take a mouthful of this wandering man? Would there be enough to go around? And then what about the next crowd, or the next generation, or the next 2,000 years? The man would be dead and there would be none left to eat. He is obviously out of his mind. But as ridiculous as it sounded, it was more than offensive. The Jew was to live a life of moral and dietary purity. They were not to eat any but the animals that God had declared pure. Peter recoiled at the thought of killing and making a meal of the varied species of foul and creeping animals in his vision upon the housetop. If this was the reaction of the good Jew to the wrong sort of animal we can be sure that the thought of eating human flesh was ten times the offense. The literal meaning of Jesus’ words were too horrible to comprehend and the spiritual meaning was beyond their understanding.

But more than these the crowds were offended at the meaning that each of these claims of Jesus seemed to point toward. Jesus was the Son of Man. Jesus was the true manna. Jesus was the sacrifice upon which the true people of God must feed. While the spiritual meaning was difficult for them the conclusion was not far to seek. Indeed, they

had begun to perceive that Jesus was claiming that he expected everyone to come to him for the gift of eternal life. He was making the shocking and offensive claim that he was the only source of their souls' relief and eternal joy. But what about the Temple, and Moses and the Law? Had they not been the way to the Father until now? Was it possible that they should be discarded at this late date and be replaced with the eating of this man's body and drinking of his blood?

But this is the offense that seems at the front of their minds when they asked him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" And he responded to them, "You must believe on him whom the Father has sent." Is that it! The holy traditions, the holy sacrifices, the holy Temple all to go away and be replaced by faith in this vagabond from Nazareth. That was preposterous. That was offensive. Seen in this light, we may sympathize with Jesus' audience, and even grieve with them a moment. For Jesus was calling them to cast away all that was dearest in their lives, even their identity as the holy nation, and follow Christ in simple faith. This was a mighty, and in the end, crippling demand for most of them.

Do we, gentile Christians living 2000 years after the fact, think that the good news of Jesus from Nazareth is offensive? I believe that we do not. The Gospel has so long been associated with social progress and good manners in the developed western world that we have lost sight of the fact that the sound of the Gospel message is one that shakes foundations and breaks down walls. Instead, many preachers in the US prefer the “health and wealth” Gospel. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. This may be so. God may love you and may have a wonderful plan for your life. But his wonderful plan may not include a Mercedes sedan or even an air-conditioned house. Express instruments of his love and care are often dropped down into wells like Jeremiah, or stoned to death like the deacon Stephen.

No, we must come to grips with the truth of the Gospel as it offends a dark and dying world even as it saves. For St. Paul wrote the Corinthians, “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both

Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” Let us then bind ourselves to the only Savior as he is presented to us hung upon the cross. Let us eat his flesh and blood by faith in him, seeing that all those who believe and follow him have life eternal. Let us not go another day that we do not ask Almighty God to transform our lives that we not be conformed to this evil world. Let us live, not offensively, but in the knowledge that we who belong to Christ and who are being saved are an offense to those who are perishing. Let us pray for all men, that God will draw many into his kingdom through the Gospel of his Son Jesus. AMEN.