

Today, I'm going to explore or at least begin to explore, how we experience words. For Christians, this is an essential question. John's gospel begins "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" which implies that the ways in which we speak about God shape the ways we understand God. If we understand God correctly, we find the way of life. If we don't, we get entangled by fear and death. Words are the electrons which energize us. The light which is both particle and wave. The clothing of our souls.

In that spirit, I'm going to read three short excerpts from today's readings, separated by a short silence. During the silence, I invite you to experience the words in them. Not as Christian doctrine or received wisdom, but as words. And how those words make you feel.

Here's the first. It's from the Collect.

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life:

[Pause]

The second comes from the Epistle.

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

[Pause]

The last hails from the Gospel.

So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.... Whoever eats me will live because of me.

How did the world of these passages feel to you? Are you comforted by them? Do they make you feel safe? Do you want to be part of their world? Does Jesus being a sacrifice for sin make you long to live a Godly life? Do you hesitate to reach out to others because the days are evil? What do you experience during the Eucharist? Does Jesus' call to eat his flesh and drink his blood ever bother you? It's bothered a lot of people.

There's a big story in these three small passages.

Like Jesus, we live in a world where bloody sacrifice is routine. We regularly sacrifice others to feed the furnace of our insatiable need. We don't even call this sacrifice any more. We call it the Industrial Revolution, or since this sermon is about words, the Information Revolution.

In a world governed by high levels of violence, even if we ourselves are safe, we know that the world around us is not. Look at Gaza. Paul's right. The days are evil. We can either resist or succumb.

And then, as all this killing is going on, Jesus tells us that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we will have no life in us. What? Our culture tells us to get ahead by making sacrifices, by feeding the furnace of progress, and then God arrives and says, Don't feed me. Let me feed you.

To a mystic, this is not a scandalous teaching. God is the Word. Words are meant to be eaten and digested. The prophets receive their calling when the word of God touches their tongues. They eat the scrolls on which the word is written. Our collect for the second to last Sunday in the Church year reads:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ*

To a mystic, Jesus, who is the Word, will never be fully understood unless you let his teachings nourish you and since we are what we eat, letting him become you. Otherwise, it is only words.

Perhaps I shouldn't say "only words." Blood has been spilled over words. Disinformation campaigns manipulate words to twist hearts and minds. Autocratic and repressive regimes cancel words and ban books. Righteous people are "offended" by the wrong words. In Liberal-land, woe to the one who offends!

Meanwhile, the ancient Romans, who were totally lunkheaded literalists, decided that the Christians were cannibals. Not only cannibals. Christians ate innocent babies and got drunk on their blood. Remember that notorious pizza parlor in Washington where nefarious Democrats trafficked in innocent children? That parlor was open long before anyone had ever heard of Democrats.

Believe me. Conspiracy theory is not a new idea.

Here's an example of what the Romans said about Christians. They were penned by a Christian author named Minucius Felix in order to disprove them, but it makes them not a whit less colorful. Here goes: "The Religion of the Christians is Foolish, Inasmuch as They Worship a Crucified Man, and Even the Instrument Itself of His Punishment. They are Said to Worship the Head of an Ass (??), and Even the Nature of Their Father. They are Initiated by the Slaughter and the Blood of an Infant, and in Shameless Darkness They are All Mixed Up in an Uncertain Medley.

"Assuredly this confederacy ought to be rooted out and execrated. They know one another by secret marks and insignia, and they love one another almost before they know one

another. Everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call one another promiscuously brothers and sisters.

“Now the story about the initiation of young novices is as much to be detested as it is well known. An infant covered over with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds.

Thirstily – O horror! they lick up its blood; eagerly they *divide* its limbs. *By this victim they are pledged together*; with this consciousness of wickedness they are *covenanted* to mutual silence.<sup>1</sup>”

The Christians are even accused of cruelly strangling a dog at their debauched and drunken feasts. (Yes, the Romans were dog lovers.)

Like all such libel, this depiction of the Christians tells us a great deal more about the people spreading the rumors than the Christians themselves.

The real scandal of the early Christians was that they were not this way. They were peaceful. The Roman accusers hated them for being peaceful. It was not patriotic to be peaceful, and so they accused them of eating babies.

Why did peace freak the violent Romans out? At least two answers come to mind. One is that peace, which is but another word for perfect love, judges violence by unmasking it, by revealing how cruel and wrong it really is. The powerful do not like to be critiqued. The second is that violence has no power over peace. They can kill it, but they can't destroy it. They cannot prevail against it. Have you ever been furious at someone who refused to be moved by your tantrum? If you have, you will know. Love is stronger than rage. Love is stronger than death.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://clarifyingcatholicism.org/articles/why-were-the-early-christians-accused-of-cannibalism/>

If one is violent, one sees God as a stern and angry judge, seeking to control the unruly people. Or as Meta oligarch Mark Zuckerberg famously said, “We’re going to move fast and we’re going to break things.”

If one walks the way of love, one meets an unperturbable God who has very little desire to break things and a great longing to make us strong and whole, a wondrous ecosystem of diverse lives, each with its own unique gift, a song of wind and waters and flutes and voices and birds and bullfrogs, a blooming reality where none go hungry and all come to life. Where death is an interlude, not an end.

The culture of violence does not want us to know that.

The culture of violence imposes a terrible choice: join it or resist it. We can shield ourselves from the evil day, or join the throngs who want to make evil great again.

In the culture of love, resistance is futile. When love governs, we are invited to be open. The culture of love is all about embrace. Loving the broken. Going outdoors into a world without walls. Not being a snob anymore. Realizing that the person I mistook for evil incarnate is really an injured child whom nobody cared for. And reveling in how strong and wonderful love’s insights are.

But you can’t do the culture of love alone. Love is all about relationship. It’s not heavy breathing wild desire, nor is it singing Kumbaya around a campfire, although it may include both. It’s stronger than anything, because it is the nature of God. (Which the Romans believed was none of our business.) Before I can meet the nature of God, I must first, open and truly meet my own nature and that means meeting who I am. Not who my mother thinks I am, or my society, or my own expectations. I’m much more interesting and more deliciously ordinary than anyone’s opinion.

This is one reason we come together at church. We learn to look at ourselves and others through the eyes of God. And as we do this, we transform each other, and as we grow, the scriptures grow with us. As we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's commandments, we begin to see, again and again, that the most important commandment is simply to love God. Only as I can love God can I experience in every moment of my being how very much God loves me. Flesh and blood become bread and wine. Amen.