

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
August 9, 2009
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

"Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that has come down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die."

- St. John 6: 49-50

Western society is often – and rightly – accused of being greedy and acquisitive. We never seem to have enough; we are never satisfied; we always want more. Everything, so it seems, is a commodity to be bought or sold. We are the ultimate conspicuous consumers, and what we consume most is the beauty of the world and of one another. Our mania for convenience has led us to consume more and more of the earth's resources – to our own peril. Not willing to live according to the earth's natural rhythms, we have come to believe that we can eat anything at any time – even if it comes from a greenhouse half a world away. Our inability to master our own appetites has led to the scandalous trafficking of human flesh – for both sexual and medical gratification. The cycle is vicious and seemingly never-ending: as we devour more, we want more. We have consumed the beauty of the earth, of scientific discovery, and of human dignity and are more and more making the world a place of ugliness and emptiness.

The awful, never-ending drive to get more and to conspicuously consume is nothing more than an attempt at escape. For life itself with all its vicissitudes, challenges, and perils can be pretty bleak. It can – and usually does – fail to satisfy. This is not to say that contemporary life is without its glories or that our individual lives are marked solely by unremitting dreariness. I am *not* suggesting that at some point in the rosy past things were all sweetness and light; a brief survey of living conditions even at the turn of the twentieth century – just as this Cathedral Church was being built – will tell us that we are, in most ways immeasurably better off, at least when it comes to creature comforts and the increase of leisure time.

Despite this, all of us know, in one way or another, that much of the time life can seem akin to wandering in a wilderness. Our Lord is, I think, talking of exactly this in the gospel reading you just heard. He uses the illustration of manna in the wilderness; we can supply our own illustrations of whatever it is we feed on in the hope of gratifying our inner appetites. And he speaks of himself as God's gift of sustenance for time and eternity, suggesting that eating him is the only way to satisfy the never-ending hunger pangs deep within. The

more comfortable we have got, the more detached we have become from one another, and those pangs have grown more and more acute. And it is this that has led to our destructive appetites.

In her fascinating book, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*, the theologian Ann Astell (echoing the French philosopher Simone Weil) proposes two ways of eating beauty: “One way of eating beauty destroys the beauty of the world and the beloved; the other preserves and enhances it.” She proposes that, though in lust and greed we see beauty and then consume to it our, and its, destruction, Christ gives us himself that we might consume him and then be able to look upon him – the perfect image of beauty – with unveiled face, and even, in some sense, to begin to be transformed into that beautiful vision. And so, the bread of the Eucharist is in a very real sense the reversal of the apple of Eden.

When the church “does this” – when it celebrates the sacred mysteries of the Eucharist – it proclaims that there is another way to live, a better way: one in which all of the tawdriness and ugliness and sham of our lives is transformed; one in which what we consume does not leave us wanting more; one in which our deepest longings are met and satisfied.

When we consume the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we come to life, because we now share in his life. But at first blush this is the most un-beautiful thing imaginable: that silver cup we drink from contains the blood of Christ; it is his cup of woe. And that bread is nothing more than his torn and battered flesh. The image is too graphic for you? If so, then we have perhaps begun to plumb the depths of the paradox of God's redemptive and awesome mercy. But the mercy is severe. There is no saccharine answer to all of life's complexities here, and in fact it is just the opposite. The way we find life – the only life that matters, which is life with God – is by and through our participation in Christ's own life, and by sharing his sorrows. This is why Jesus says that only those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have life, which is this life with God, the life of which we even now partake and of which we have a foretaste in the Eucharist. The Kingdom of God and the life in that Kingdom which is promised us is not just in the future, over there, but is coming and is even now breaking in all its beauty upon us and is transforming us from those who consume beauty into those who have been consumed by the beauty of God's immeasurable and irresistible grace and love.