

A comment on the hymn we just sang (Dancing in the Universe, #24 “As grain on scattered hillsides” by Ruth Duck), and its use of the images of bread and of yeast in vs. 3. It illustrates, first, how cultural attitudes toward images sometimes reverse themselves, sometimes flip-flop. Second, it is an example of how Jesus, as pictured in the gospels, seems to go out of his way to use unacceptable things to illustrate what he means by the kingdom of God. He uses foreigners, heretics, women, children, weeds, and says that the Kingdom of God is like all these things which are either undesirable or of little account in the culture.

Sometimes to understand a parable or teaching of Jesus one needs to put together things said in several different places in the gospels to make a larger picture. If there is anything we can say about the historical Jesus, with some likelihood of truth, it is that he used imagery to talk about the Kingdom of God which would have caused his hearers trouble. This is attested in enough separate incidents and in enough incidents for which we can trace the textual history back through the pre-written state to something like original teaching, to create a reasonable belief that the historical Jesus used language in this way.

Now, as for the meaning of metaphors reversing, in the ancient world, for the most part, fermentation was not seen as a good thing. We tend to think of it as a good thing because we get wine and cheese from it. And so did they. But what they were most aware of was that if the process wasn't stopped at the right point, it wrecked that rare and precious commodity, food. Their lives were more likely a battle against fermentation and spoilage than a chance to appreciate its products. After all, the process was a major cause of one of the constant threats to every Mediterranean community: famine and starvation. So they were acutely aware of the destructive and limiting aspects of the process, having fewer and less effective means of controlling its negative results than modern humans. If one looks at images of yeast and fermentation in ancient literature outside the New Testament, they are not favorable.

So Jesus is at least tweaking people's expectations when he says, compare the Kingdom of God to this batch of meal with the yeast in it. This would not be an expected image. And yet in the song we just sang, the leavening of the bread and the use of yeast is given an uncompromising positive understanding. I offer these comments simply as an example of how images tend to be reinterpreted in the history of a tradition. We change frameworks and then the image calls forth a different response. For us, yeast imagery implies life and growth. For ancient people it implied death and dissolution.

When Jesus uses images of yeast, he's going to provoke a “Say what?” response from his hearers. A response largely missing from contemporary western reactions to New Testament stories of bread and yeast.

Now from yeast to bread is a short jump, so a couple of words on Jesus as the bread of life. I do not find this image easy to understand or to accept. Jesus is trying to use bread as an image to talk about our relationship with God. What are the ingredients, what's the shape, of a lasting relationship with God? I think this is the question beneath the bread imagery. When Jesus says that those who eat of this bread will have everlasting life, I don't think he's talking in a magical

way – although the passage has been frequently understood in just such ways. I don't think he's saying, attend the Eucharist, eat the bread, drink the wine, and it's like the apples of Idun in Norse mythology, as long as you keep on eating this food you'll keep on living. On the obvious level, it's not true, we know we'll die whether we eat the Eucharistic bread or not.

So what's he talking about here? It's helpful, I think, to go back one step farther and ask, "How does John understand eternal life?" The answer is a bit surprising, and there's an interesting story, which most of you may already know, behind it.

In the middle of the 19th century there was brilliant and somewhat idiosyncratic Anglican theologian named F. D. Maurice. Maurice was constantly saying difficult and unexpected things. He observed, and nothing much has changed, that churches spend a great deal of time arguing about which one is right. Maurice believed this to be misplaced effort because all churches were more or less wrong. His position was that the important thing about being the church of God was not to prove your church right in comparison with other people's, but to find out where yours was wrong. Maurice then went on to imply that there would be enough to do in fixing whatever one discovered in that enterprise that one would be busy for the rest of one's life. This, in the midst of the Christian triumphalism of the mid and late 19th century, was not a popular attitude. He did claim that the Church of England, of which he was a member, had a fuller sense of what Christianity was about than, say, the Quakers, but he wasn't sure that made much difference because the Quakers were so much better at what they did do. So F. D. Maurice had a bit of a rocky ride through life, which didn't stop him from saying outrageous things.

He was an interesting man.

Anyway, he was asked to teach a class at the University of London on the Gospel according to John. So he thought, well, I need to take all the commentaries, put them on shelves and not spend much time reading them. Then I will go back to the Greek. (Like all good theologians of the 19th century, he knew his Greek almost as well as his English and could have addressed an Athenian crowd with the same facility with which I give these sermons.) So he goes back to the Greek, gives it a careful reading and comes to the conclusion that John makes a distinction between eternal life and life everlasting. In John's gospel eternal life does not mean life that goes on forever. Eternal life means life lived in relation to God as foundation and not something else. Its lastingness comes through its relation with God and not because human existence has everlastingness as a characteristic of its own nature. In other words, the capacity of human beings to live forever is a divine gift and a divine gift only. Maurice was thrown off the staff at the University of London for saying that, and the only vindication he's had is that practically all scholars now paying attention to John's gospel agree with him. He was right. John does make that distinction.

So Jesus, as the bread of life, leading to eternal life, is talking primarily of the nature, the quality, the requirements for participation in, a relationship, and not about duration as a thing in itself. Now, duration may, in fact, be implied in the nature of our relationship with God, but let's get things in proper order. Eternal life is talking about relationship first, and then, if duration is implied, it comes along second – because of the nature of the relation and not as something in and of itself.

What I'm going to spend a few minutes on today is exactly what Maurice didn't do: talk about how duration is derived from relationship. It goes something like this. I think I can explain this simply.

To eat the bread of Eucharist is understood by John as opening a door to participation in the life of Christ. Which means to participate in the life of God, as God is present in this world. We may want to participate in the life of the Trinity, but we can only, in a sense, do that in another world. But the incarnation, and, if I may use the term, the fallout from the incarnation, the presence of the Holy Spirit, means that God is present within the realm of history. God is present within the human story. And, as we are coming to recognize more and more, therefore in the story of the natural world.

What the doctrine of incarnation means is this presence of God is local. The Gnostics and many other sects of the late ancient world, such as the Mandaeans, said, "God is way up there, (sometimes literally) and the task of religion is to get us from here to there." At its most primitive this involved learning all the magical passwords which got you past the hostile planetary spirits who guarded the different levels of heaven. So you ascend to, say, the sphere of Mars, and you need to know the magical password which gets you past the spirit of that sphere. He is, for some unexplained reason, blocking the way to where you're going. Then, of course, it gets more and more sophisticated. Finally you get to Plotinus and Neoplatonism and Numenius the Middle Platonist, and you have some pretty noble ideas about religion, but it's still on this same basic pattern that its task is getting from here to there. To relate to God, we move and he doesn't.

What is unusual and striking about Christianity is that the image of getting from here to there is not lost. Look at, for instance, Pilgrim's Progress. The story is based on a "progress" in the old sense of the word, a sponsored journey. For example: a royal progress, a sponsored journey from here to there. John Bunyan has Christian, the protagonist, start out in the City of Destruction and end at Mount Zion. So the image of pilgrimage, of moving from here to there, is preserved in Christianity.

The difference between Christianity and these Gnostic cults is that we don't move from here to there because God is there and not here. We move from here to there because if we don't, the fullness of the capacity of God to be present in our humanity is not realized. That's a quite different thing from moving from here to there because God isn't here and is only there and if we're going to see or know God we have to go somewhere else. From the very beginning, Christianity has been clear that God is here. That's what Jesus and the Holy Spirit are about. To be religious in the Christian sense of the word, means not to go somewhere else to find God, but to live out of the presence of God here. That's what it means to be a Christian person, to live out of the presence of God in this world.

So eternal life, for John, is simply the discovery of God's presence and the unfolding of an increasing ability to base one's life on that presence and not on something else. We are not to base the Christian life even on all the means of knowing God, on the assumption that God is somewhere else and we need to discover him and, therefore, know how to discover him through scripture or sacrament or prayer or tradition.

This is where the distinction can get somewhat subtle. For instance, does one read scripture in order to discover the absent God or does one read scripture in order to discover the present God? In other words, is religion more like packing a suitcase, getting ready for a trip; or is religion more like looking at a picture and discovering that the longer you look at it the more you see in it, but what you see was already there to be seen.

What the Gospel of John proposes is that religion is like the latter. This is why, for the church, doing its intellectual homework on, for instance, the relation between science and religion is so important. If we do not discover the truth of God by looking at the world around us, I don't think we can pack a suitcase for of tools for finding God and go on a trip to find him elsewhere and stay within the Christian world. We may end up being profoundly religious people, but we will be something outside the purview of Christianity. Christianity bases itself profoundly on the idea of incarnation. God is here, and we discover him here in order that we may know his fullness there. That idea was something relatively new with Christianity.

Now the Greeks were familiar with the idea of the gods being present in this world. But they were present in this world irruptively and not constantly. Every Greek temple, sited on some glorious headland looking over an arm of the wine-dark Aegean Sea, was sited there because someone had an experience of divine presence irrupting into the ordinary (The Greeks tended to see their deities, while the Hebrews heard theirs.) It is the irruption into the ordinary, and the human response to that irruption which constitutes the foundation of their religion.

But the foundation of Christianity is the attempt to allow God to be expressed to us in the ordinary, in the everyday, in the constantly present and not to build religion on a few peculiar but powerful experiences. Peculiar experiences have this drawback: they tend to limit the sphere of God to the peculiar and extraordinary. This is relevant to the problem of miracle in the New Testament: I'd rather have a God who is constantly present than one who is occasionally present in an irruption in which he rearranges things and then goes away, leaving me to my own devices until I need rearrangement again. This is why, when people start to get excited about apparitions of Mary in obscure valleys, I begin to get slightly nervous, wondering, "What do I do then, with most of my life?"

This, I think, is the question for John's gospel. According to Maurice, John sees eternal life as a characteristic of how life is lived. We have eternal life if we live our lives out of God, founded on God, and not on something else. How living our lives based on God leads to a life of infinite duration is that God does not die. To the extent we participate in God's life, we do not die. We do not live forever because we have immortality in and of ourselves, but because we participate in God. The distinction is pretty clear and pretty important. In the ethical realm, and for me this is the easiest place to grasp it, it asserts, in the most basic possible way, that it's not all about me. I've run into people who live their lives so that they can get into heaven and have never experienced people so self centered. Every act of charity is performed, not out of love of the other, but for the sake of a good mark for themselves – and thus every act of charity has a reflexive aspect which takes it back to the self as the act's primary focus. Precisely the opposite of the love Jesus proposes as the foundation for Christian life.

To understand eternal life not as my life in heaven, but as God's life in me, changes that

whole perspective. I'm not the center anymore. God is the center and, in the long run, that's a far healthier and safer place for Christians to be.

That's all I've got to say about that. Please stand for the creed.