

John's gospel has Jesus spending a lot of time distinguishing those who believe from those who do not, John does this not just to recount the history of Jesus ministry but to prompt his readers to examine their own belief in Jesus as the one come from God.

This week those who have participated in the feeding of the 5,000 are chasing Jesus because they want more food. They want to know where his power came from and how he got to be who he was. Jesus responds to them and tells them that they need to work for the food that he will give them, the bread of eternal life rather than a food substance. The crowd doesn't get it, they ask him what they need to do to be right with God, as if they can earn their way into eternal life. Jesus tells them that they need to believe in him, he who was sent by God.

Like people who don't believe facts that conflict with their beliefs, the crowd still doesn't get it. They clamor for another sign that he is really from God. What more could they want than what they had already seen Jesus do in feeding so many? The crowd want the reassurance of something familiar. They want to see the manna that Moses gave them in the wilderness. Manna was important because it was supposed to show up again when the messiah had come. They were not able to accept Jesus as the one sent by God.

Jesus points out that Moses certainly didn't call down manna from heaven, that manna was a gift of God's grace, a gift that gives life to the world. "OK" says the crowd, we'll take it". Jesus tells them again that the bread of eternal life is that which has come down from heaven, namely himself. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

Every week we receive the bread of heaven, the Body of Christ, praying that this is now the holy food of unending life, but what does that mean? What do we believe that this bread has become after the priest has recited the history of salvation, and recalled that moment in the Last Supper when Jesus told his disciples to do this in memory of him, and invoked the Holy Spirit to bless the gifts of bread and wine?

There are many ways to receive that bread. We know what we see in that it is a wafer made of flour and water. Outwardly it never changes from being bread made with flour and water, this is a fact and yet what we are taught, what we believe in our hearts moves us to another dimension.

Some believe that we partake of the bread as a memorial, but that Jesus has been present with us in the prayers and in the gathered community. It is still a holy moment, just that the bread itself doesn't acquire any mystical properties. There is justification for this understanding: the last words that the priest says before distributing communion, "The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving"

Others receive communion believing that Christ is present in the bread in the moment of reception but that again, the bread itself doesn't acquire any mystical properties. In Eucharistic Prayer A, we ask the Holy Spirit to sanctify the gifts to become a holy food and to

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sanctify us to receive the sacrament faithfully with the prospect of transformation in serving God.

Still others believe that the elements are transformed during the Eucharistic prayer and that they retain their mystical properties after communion. This is perhaps the most common understanding and shows up in how we treat the bread after it has been blessed. If a host falls to the ground the priest will consume it and not throw it out. We reserve the bread in the tabernacle and bow to it before removing the vessel that holds the leftover hosts. We bow because we believe that Christ is fully present in the bread. There is an old saying attributed to Queen Elizabeth I *"Twas God the Word that spake it, He took the Bread and brake it: And what that Word did make it, That I believe and take it."* In other words, something happens, but we don't know how or what, it is enough that it happens.

Those who come from the Roman Catholic tradition may know about transubstantiation which holds that the essence of the bread is transformed while the bread itself remains just bread. Transubstantiation is similar to the more traditional Anglican approach but different in specifying how the change happens – which as Anglicans we leave as a mystery.

Yes, believing in Jesus with our minds is important but it is what we do with what we believe that opens for us the gateway to eternal life. This is not the same thing as the crowds' question, "What must we do to perform the works of God." We try to do what God has asked us to do in gratitude, not in order to earn a reward. In the gospel of John Jesus' reference to eternal life is not to some far-off time but to the here and now. He is saying that when we believe, we are transformed through the works that we do making our lives richer, better, fuller and opening our eyes to the gifts of the world around us.

Holy communion is the sign in which we participate in the God whom we believe to be present with us, the God who guides us, nurtures us, comforts us, challenges us, and sustains us in this life and in the life to come. When you receive that bread today, no matter how you think about what it is, remember that this simple wafer of flour and water draws us into relationship with each other and God in Christ, try to be conscious of what is happening deep within you. That means opening your heart, the understanding that is at the very core of your being to something beyond a wafer of flour and water, a water that may stick to the roof of your mouth, or that you have picked up the taste of lingering hand sanitizer when it was placed in your hand. All that may be true in the physical world but there is something more, in our hearts we want to know, we want to accept, we want to feel the truth of Jesus words "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

Amen.