

Eating flesh, drinking blood, Jesus abiding in them, they abiding in Jesus. Yes, this teaching is difficult, and no wonder some of his disciples found it hard to accept! If we are honest with ourselves, we do too. And for those who do not “come to believe” it can be difficult for them to accept that anyone could or would “come to believe”. Surely some of you have family or friends who think you are a bit nuts to be involved in all this churchy stuff?

Are we a bit nuts to believe what we say in the Nicene Creed, that Jesus was born, lived, and died, and rose again and has promised us eternal life? In what many scholars believe to be the original ending to John’s gospel, the author writes that Jesus did many more signs than what was recorded, “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

I have said before that processing the facts about Jesus’ life does not make us “come to believe.” So how does this “come to believe” happen? It usually isn’t a rational logical decision, much though theologians have spent gallons of ink trying to prove the existence of God and so forth. For every logical reason put forth there is usually one that from a rational critical point can undermine any arguments. Nevertheless, most of us who have come into faith recognize that when we did our hearts shifted, and that they “were strangely warmed” as John Wesley put it when he had his “come to Jesus moment” back in the 18th century. We know too that that shift into “believe” changes the lens through which we see the world and influences our rational thought processes as well as our feelings. Still, that moment of coming to faith remains a mystery.

Jesus proposes the answer in one of the most paradoxical things about what it means to believe in him, what it means to be a Christian. He says “...I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” (John 6:44)

Whoa. “...no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

If that statement doesn’t give you whiplash, perhaps it should. Here is Jesus traveling around ancient Palestine, preaching the word to any who care to listen, encouraging people to believe in him, performing signs or miracles meant to demonstrate his power, to believe in what he is saying, to believe in who he claims to be, that such believing is up to us. In fact, Jesus seems to hold accountable those who choose not to believe: the religious authorities, the people who come for food for the belly but not for the soul, even those disciples who just can’t go there with him. But given that statement “no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” are we free to choose whether or not to believe? If God did not choose to grant his listeners the capacity to believe, is it their fault if they can’t, or don’t, or won’t believe?

Furthermore, what does this say about each of us as we struggle through the challenges of our lives when some days we believe, meaning we trust, we act in faith, we know to whom we belong, and other days, or even months or years when we just can’t go there, when the state of the world, something that happens to us, or to those whom we love, something seems to make believing unbearably difficult or even impossible?

Does it mean that God has cut us off, has stopped granting us the capacity to believe? My faith, the faith of the church, the faith expressed through scripture in the history of the people of God, in the cries of lamentation, anger, and despair, triumph joy, and praise expressed in the psalms, tells us no. But that doesn't stop the little voice that wonders if God had granted us anything at all.

So, which do you think it is? Are we free to choose or has God selected only some of us to believe? Exploring this question involves what we think about sin and how it influences the choices we make, grace and the gift of being able to live according to God's will. In addition, we will answer the question based on how we believe God is acting in the world, does God cause everything to happen, (I hope not) does God preordain everything to happen, (I hope not) or are events random, (I hope not) or does God have a plan for salvation (I hope so) and that plan takes into consideration the choices that we make, colored as they are by sin? Again, I hope so.

Certainly, we are not going to answer these questions today; theologians have been arguing about them for almost 2,000 years. All we have to do is look at the history of the world, at our human failures and as well as at our accomplishments, to know that the answer to this is going to be complicated and perhaps ones which we may not have the capacity to answer. Yet these are legitimate questions, not to undermine faith but to explore what it means when we come to believe. The ultimate definition of theology, according to St. Anselm is "faith seeking understanding." We need to explore these questions as we encounter God in scripture, in prayer, in meditation, and in worship so that we might discern how best to respond to God as we are drawn ever closer to him through his Son Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we can continue to be grateful that God's grace has granted us access to the Son. We could choose to turn away, to reject God's offer but as Simon Peter said to Jesus, when asked if he wished to leave, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:58-59)

Amen