

Intolerable Language: Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery

Patricia Klindienst

'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood
lives in me
and I in him.
As I, who am sent by the living Father,
myself draw life from the Father,
so whoever eats me will draw life from me.
This is the bread come down from heaven;
not like the bread our ancestors ate:
they are dead,
but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.'
He taught this doctrine at Capernaum, in the synagogue. After
hearing it, many of his followers said, 'This is intolerable language.
How could anyone accept it?'

(John 6:56-61)¹

The phrase the Jerusalem Bible translates as 'intolerable language' is rendered as 'a hard saying' in the Revised Standard Edition. The Oxford Bible's comment on Jesus' 'hard' words is notably bland: '*Hard saying* means offensive or difficult, but not obscure.' Perhaps. But freedom from the threat of offence, that is, obedient reception of official interpretation -eating Jesus' word prefigures the eucharist² - is purchased only by retrospection, a look back from ritual to its constituting moments. This can silence in us the utterly believable question which the text records as one unmediated response to hearing Jesus speak of himself so strangely: 'How could *anyone* accept it?' The text records the prophet's complex speech-act as well as dramatizing the problem of its reception: the shock and confusion of hearing the ground of one's belief shifted.

It has always been important for the exegetes, who mediate the gospel's reception, to distinguish the good from the bad reading of this text - which calls continual attention to the perilous distance between speaker and listener - by referring us to the differences among listeners in the text. What we decide Jesus means is, John insists, a matter of life and death: on our acts of interpretation Christians stake their lives. And as we have struggled to understand what authentic witness to this text might mean, we have often been taught that we must not be like 'the Jews', here set up as prime examples of bad or literal readers. It is history, specifically, the history of Christian intolerance - *persecution in the name of the victim* - which has made the Christian Church's tendency to define itself at the expense of the gospel's bracketed other, 'the Jews', intolerable. We must question the way the gospels constitute themselves as Christianity's founding texts, bearing in mind, always, that they are not finished; they are not primarily or ultimately texts. The gospels are opened to fresh interpretations in their ongoing life as liturgy, as the revised rubric for Good Friday makes stunningly clear. In the post-Holocaust, post-Vatican II era, the American Catholic Church has the worshipping community play *every* role in the Passion. In our own language, it is we who shout 'Crucify him!' 'We' become 'them', the turbulent crowd; we, Christians, step into the place of 'the Jews' and hear one of our own play Pilate. In a ritual with the potential to move us to self-recognition (if we connect our words with our deeds), we enter into the corporate act of worship as the internal elements of doubt and discord and own our responsibility for abandoning Jesus, our complicity in his death - and the death of innocent millions. This act of ritual substitution of 'us' for 'the others', if we let its deep structure change us, might counter the history of violence worked in the name of our cult's founding victim, by preparing us (I hope) to stand with

the persecuted. In the move from gospel text to liturgical performance, we become actors in the drama - still present, still opening its threat and promise - but only by yielding up our mythic innocence and 'the Jews' mythic guilt.

In what follows, I bear in mind, then, the power of John's testimony as contemporary ritual practice seeks to transform it, redeeming his gesture towards marking a new (old) victim - 'the Jews' (a reductive epithet he employs for a heterogeneous people at least seventy times in his testimony) - even as he discloses, with astonishing power of vision, how Jesus was marked and taken for confounding both religious and secular constructions of difference and identity.