

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Proverbs 9:1-6

Psalm 33

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

The Gospel passage we have just heard is part of the famous “Bread of Life Discourse” in the sixth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel, which we are currently progressing through in our Gospel readings. As with most of John’s Gospel the dialogue is extremely rich with meaning, and so much of our theology about the Eucharist comes from Jesus’ comments in this discourse. I encourage you to ruminate over Jesus’ magnificent words about his Body and Blood during these weeks as we make our way through this section of John’s Gospel. Maybe even re-read and dwell over them at home when you have a chance.

But before I get to the Eucharist, I’d just like to point out a fascinating sub-plot that’s going on in the background of this exchange, and which often goes unnoticed – namely, the dynamic that unfolds between Jesus and the crowd that had begun to follow him in large numbers.

Those of us who are involved in Church ministry can often get caught up in what might be crudely termed “bottoms on seats” – trying to get the message out to as many people as possible. And in one sense we have good reason for this, given that the risen Christ commanded us to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. However, in the Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus almost seems to be deliberately thinning out his audience as much as possible! Having just fed five thousand people in the Miracle of the Loaves, he had amassed a large number of curious onlookers who had followed him to his adopted home town of Capernaum. This would have been the perfect opportunity for the great sales pitch, to solidify the fan base.

But what happens? Jesus calls himself “the Bread of Life”, and insists that his followers would need to “eat his flesh”. And it’s clear that Jesus’ audience misunderstands him, thinking that he is advocating cannibalism. And this is fair enough. I mean, he does say, “eat my flesh” – if we were there two thousand years ago, we’d probably think the same thing. In response to this, what does Jesus do? Not only does he make no effort to clear up their misunderstanding, he actually doubles-down and repeats himself even more emphatically! And next week we will hear that many of his followers described Jesus’ language as “intolerable”, and stopped following him from this point onwards.

Now let’s be honest – this has got to be the worst marketing strategy in human history! There was a famous self-help book titled, “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” Well, Jesus’ approach during this encounter seems to be more a case of “How to Lose Friends and be Thought of as Crazy”! Surely he realised the effect his words were having. So, what was he up to?

My guess is that Jesus knew that the Good News that he had to offer would be an almighty shock to the system, and that if he tried to put it out there for the whole world to digest right away, they would either misunderstand it, or misuse it, or just run away screaming. As he said in another place, do not cast your pearls before swine. Don't reveal your priceless treasure to those who have no chance of comprehending it just yet. I suspect that Jesus knew that he first needed to go deep in one place, with a small group of dedicated followers who wouldn't run away at the first sign of trouble. Even *they* would not really get it on the first pass, but at least they would see it through until the penny finally began to drop.

And so in this episode—in addition to giving us a marvellous exposé on the Eucharist—I think what Jesus is doing is seeking out his small group of committed followers, and separating them from the vast hordes of hangers-on who, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, were simply looking for a free feed. He was looking for followers who would trust him with their whole lives, even when he said things that sounded a bit crazy. He was looking for followers who knew—as Peter says next week—that they had no-one else to turn to.

In the Apostles Jesus finds his small group of faithful followers, and when they finally got it, they *really* got it. Before the Resurrection, the Apostles are largely presented as earnest fools, who are trying their very best... but are hopelessly out of their depth. They're still caught up in jealousy and jockeying for position, they constantly miss the point, and—apart from John—they all run for cover when Jesus is put to death. But after the Resurrection they are changed men, and it is *they* who would take Christ's Good News to the ends of the earth, despite incredible odds.

Furthermore, it is the Apostles whom Jesus entrusts with the Eucharist – with this very mystery of “eating his flesh” that so confounds his audience in our Gospel text. And indeed, the strength of Jesus' language in this passage is a strong argument for the truth of what we Catholics call the Real Presence in the Eucharist. After all, if the Eucharist were just a symbol, when the crowds started getting agitated Jesus could have easily calmed them down by clarifying what he meant. But instead, he insists that he's not just using symbolic language—that his followers will indeed need to “eat his flesh”.

And because the Apostles were prepared to see it through to the end, this exchange bore fruit, by helping them grasp the significance of what subsequently took place at the Last Supper. Had this exchange not been burned into their memory, when Jesus took the bread and said, “This is my body,” they might well have thought it was indeed just a symbol. “Good one Jesus, you almost had us there, making us think we would actually have to eat your flesh!”

But because of Jesus' emphatic insistence that it is indeed his flesh that they would be eating—along with all the connections with the Passover Lamb that would be fleshed out (as it were) the following day at Calvary—the Apostles knew that this was no

ordinary bread and wine they were being given on that original Holy Thursday. And though it would take some time for the theology of the Eucharist to be fully hammered out, the Apostles knew enough to know that it *had* to be the centrepiece of the communities they established following the Resurrection.

As the Church spread, the Apostles entrusted the Eucharist to their successors the bishops, who in turn appointed priests to act on their behalf. And thanks to this unbroken Apostolic line—and the sacred power conferred upon me at my ordination—it is this same Eucharist that we are about to celebrate on this very altar.

As I take the bread and wine in a few minutes, and repeat the words of Christ—acting in his name—the barriers of time and space will collapse, and we will be face-to-face with the mystery that was prefigured in the Upper Room, and brought to completion upon the Cross.

Maybe you only partly believe that this is true. That's okay – partial faith is enough for God to work with. Whenever our faith is weak, we can always pray along with the father of the possessed child: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” Our *desire to believe* is almost as important as belief itself. It's what opens the door to real faith.

And so as we prepare for Christ's sacramental presence to be made a reality once more, may our desire for him be awakened. May we be grateful that the Church has been given such a great gift. May we give thanks that not everyone ran away that day in Capernaum two thousand years ago.

For those of you who will *not* be receiving communion this evening, pray that the experience will only increase your longing for union with God. And for those of you who *will* receive, pray that you will never take this gift for granted. Pray for the grace to continually appreciate the Eucharist on ever deeper levels. Above all, strive to allow your whole life to live up to the grandeur of what you are about to receive, so that, having celebrated the Mass, we may then *live* the Mass; having received Jesus, we may then *be* Jesus; having been transformed through this divine encounter, we may go forth as God's instruments for the transformation of the world.