

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: John 6:51-58

Jesus said to them, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

REFLECTION 1: JESUS LIVES IN US

In today's Gospel (John 6: 51-58) Jesus tells us, 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.' And then Jesus goes on to throw light on this extraordinary saying, 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, abides in me and I in them.' It's almost as if Jesus is giving us life by transplanting himself into us. Think for instance of organ donors, giving their hearts to other people, they are giving them real life.

Medical experts tell us that this donor-recipient connection creates what they call 'cell-memory'. They say that sensitive transplant patients may experience personal changes that parallel the history of their donors. One heart recipient said: 'The gift of life is priceless, I think of my donor every day.' Surely we think of Jesus every day and of his gift of eternal life to us!

Remember how we pray at the offertory of every Mass: 'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.' We even pray later on in the Mass (Eucharistic Prayer 3) 'Grant that we who are nourished with Christ's body and blood may be filled with his Holy Spirit and become one body, one spirit in Christ.' These are extraordinary, incredible, impossible prayers – except for the fact that they have the seal of Jesus' guarantee on them. This connection between Christ and us is indeed possible because there are two transformations that occur in every Mass. First is the transformation of bread and wine into Christ and the next is the more important, the transformation of us into Christ. St. Paul put it in his usual graphic way: 'I live in Christ and Christ lives in me.' To say that I live in Christ means that Christ uses my actions, my thoughts, my life as a way for him to live in the world. This high degree of correspondence between God and humanity goes back to the first Christians.

Holy Communion is God's greatest blessing to us on earth. It is the family meal of Christians and our bond of peace. It helps us to grow in a personal relationship with Jesus and to bring families closer together. Although the act of receiving communion is the work of a moment, yet it can have the lasting effect of putting the believer into a state of union with God. One of the ways we can show our appreciation of this great gift is by preparing for it well. We could all too easily take it for granted.

Reception of the Eucharist has a healing effect on all things, weaning us away from a focus on self to a life of togetherness with Jesus. The life of Christ within us helps us to face every challenge that comes until that moment when we shall see the risen Jesus in heaven. Then, there will be no humble appearance of bread and wine but a glorious meeting face to face. Holy Communion can bring us into a long-term relationship with Jesus. It is the foretaste and promise of a happy resurrection and eternal life.

REFLECTION 2:

HE IS THE FOOD

I remember during the Second World War a man arrived at our doorstep in Clontarf. He was in the Merchant Navy and he brought us a welcome present from America – two crusty white wheaten loaves of bread. It was like manna from heaven compared to the unappetizing brown bread we were used to at the time – the sweepings from the granary floor. Food of course was a primary concern for the half-starving people who listened to Jesus and followed him. The bread they consumed was made from barley and the wine they drank was watered down leftovers. Fish was scarce and meat too expensive. So we find food or the lack of it everywhere in the Gospels. Jesus used the subject of food to demonstrate his intimate attachment to God. He even uses it in phrases like 'My food is to do the will of the Father'. Jesus' farewell to his chosen disciples takes place in the context of a dinner we call the Last Supper and Jesus' final words to Peter were 'Feed my sheep'. Jesus in the synoptic Gospels (Mark, Luke and Matthew) seems to be going to eat, eating or coming from eating. But today's Gospel presents one exception to this; Jesus actually declares that he is in fact the actual food himself. 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains with me and I in that person' (Jn 6: 56). This graphic description that Jesus uses causes great alarm among certain of his original listeners. When we first heard this ourselves we could identify ourselves with the crowd and want to respond with a resounding 'Yuck!' So Jesus' listeners ask 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' It sounded like cannibalism to them – the eating of flesh and the drinking of blood. Jesus even uses a verb that indicates the physical crunching with teeth. What are we to make of this? How can we share in the eating and drinking that Jesus proposes in this Gospel?

It's important to realise that Jesus is talking to us here on two levels. First, he reminds his Jewish listeners that the word of God spoken to them in their Mosaic Law was often described as food, food to be eaten and consumed. Their relationship with God was so extraordinary and to bring home to them how passionately God desires to be in union with humankind, he states that God is now present in the person of Jesus Christ himself. The Law of the Old Testament is now taken to a new level and that Law has now been replaced by the death and resurrection of Jesus. God has entered into the relationship with the world that is so personal and so intimate that the only way to describe it is through the act of eating and drinking. The sharing of food becomes a picture of a mutual love affair, one in which we live in Jesus and Jesus lives in us. This is precisely what happens each time we take the body and blood of Christ into our own bodies.

Our hope and intention is that by his most tactile and intimate way of approaching God, we will allow him all the way down into the deepest and most intimate part of ourselves. If I may dare to say it, God has become part of our DNA. The goal of the Eucharist is to do just that – to nourish us, strengthen us and change us in the same way as food and drink transforms us physically. 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in that person'. St. Paul put it this way, 'the cup we use in the Lord's Supper and for which we give thanks to God: when we drink it, we are sharing in the blood of Christ. And the bread we break, when we eat it, we are sharing in the bread of Christ. Because there is one loaf of bread, all of us through many, are one body for we all share the same loaf'. (1 CO 10: 16-17).