

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: John 6:60-69

Many of the disciples of Jesus remarked, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe."

For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

REFLECTION 1: NO COMPROMISE

The Bread of Life Discourse culminates in today's Gospel (John 6: 60-69) almost like a Shakespearian Tragedy. In contrast to the thronging crowds in awe over the multiplication of the loaves and fish and intent on making Jesus their king, there was left just a forlorn group of believing followers. For Jesus there would be no compromise, no whittling down of the mighty gift he was giving, his 'flesh for the life of the world.' Their choice at the synagogue at Capernaum was made clear – even Jesus' chosen disciples are prone to falter. 'Will you also go away', Jesus asked, throwing down the challenge, which would ultimately lead to the cross. For the survival of Jesus' mission, the dawning of faith was imperative. Peter as spokesperson heroically responds, 'Where shall we go, you have the words of eternal life?' The remnant would hold. It reminded me of Marshal Ferdinand Foch's response to the High Command during a critical moment in World War 1, 'My centre has collapsed, my right flank is in retreat, I am advancing!'

The real obstacle in the minds of Jesus' listeners was that he, Jesus, declared that he had come down from heaven. Weren't his father and mother known to them – just ordinary folk? Besides their concept of salvation was confined to this life only. Like their ancestors who had eaten manna in the desert, they also would die – end of story. The notion of living forever was incredulous – after life in another world was the stuff of fairytales. They might have reflected on the Pharisees' belief in the resurrection of the body after death, but that was not part of their agenda. This Jesus of Nazareth was just another storyteller. Anyway it had been a long day, so they went home.

The Good News is that we do believe that Jesus is present, body, soul and divinity in the Eucharistic elements. He is the Holy One of God, the Way, the Truth and the Life. He has come down to planet earth, sent by the Father so as to share his divinity with our humanity. If we abide by his commandments, loving God and neighbour, a better and more wonderful life awaits us beyond the grave for all eternity. To have been born into the age of Christendom is indeed a tremendous privilege. Unlike Blessed John XXIII our bags may not yet be packed, but we have the essentials, especially the food for this journey.

REFLECTION 2: A TIME OF DECISION

You may have heard the saying 'when the going gets tough, then the tough get going.' Some of Jesus' followers found their discipleship too difficult and went home. They couldn't believe in his teachings. But the tough twelve stayed on and Peter expressed it best of all, 'We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.' Commitment is the key to today's scriptures. In the First Reading we hear how Joshua is facing the end of his days and he wants his people to know who they are before God. He reminds his people of all that God has done on their behalf and after working the crowd to a high emotional pitch, he thunders out his message. 'Decide whom you shall serve, as for me

and my household we shall serve the Lord!' The people renew their commitment and respond, 'We will also serve the Lord' the situation John describes in today's Gospel is quite different. Jesus' bread of life talk has caused such division that the majority of his disciples were leaving him – they could not accept that he was actually the bread come down from heaven.

There are times in the life of all of us when we are simply pushed to the wall, ready to quit. We see this in today's Gospel when the disciples of Jesus are pressurized – their faith in Jesus challenged severely by what Jesus said earlier about giving them his body to eat. So, the disciples respond to the challenge in two ways. One finds Jesus' words too hard to take, they part company with him and no longer walk with him. The second group meets the challenge successfully and remains faithful to Jesus. So, we may very well ask as to why the first group failed the challenge and the second group succeeds? The Gospel does not really resolve that question, but it does leave us with a clue and it is this. When Jesus asks the second group 'would you also like to leave?', Peter answers with this saying, 'Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life and we believe and know that you are the Holy One who has come from God.' When pushed to the wall, they kept their eyes firmly focused on Jesus; the problems posed by what Jesus had said didn't distract them. When pressed they fell back on their personal faith in Jesus. On the other hand the group that failed did just the opposite – they fixed all their attention on the problem, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' In short they took their eyes off Jesus. There was a similar kind of situation when Jesus was seen walking on the water and Jesus urged Peter to leave the boat and come to him. He hesitated and at once Jesus reached out and grabbed hold of Peter and said, 'What little faith you have, why did you doubt?' The point is this, as long as Peter kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, he was all right, but when he took his eyes off Jesus and began to focus on his problem, that's when he began to sink.

As when Jesus tells his disciples about the Eucharist, there will be times in all our lives when our faith will be challenged too as happened some years ago at the publication of the Murphy Report that challenged the faith of so many. We may even have been tempted ourselves to part company with Jesus and his church and walk with him no more. So, let's not fix our attention so much on the problem but on the person of Jesus, affirming our faith in him as Peter did and say, 'Lord, you have the words that give eternal life...we believe...that you are the Holy One that comes from God.'