

**The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Year B: Decision time: choose one way or the other!**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Joshua 24:1-2+15-18: The Hebrews choose the ‘true’ God;**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Ephesians 5:21-32: Deciding to do right in family life;**

**Gospel: John 6: 61-70: Most of Jesus’ followers reject him – but why?**

Last weekend’s gospel (John 6:51-59) was one of the most important in our 3-year cycle, for in it, Jesus taught what the Holy Eucharist actually means. I hope you will bear with me when I repeat part of it, since it explains this Sunday’s piece, where many of Jesus’ followers reject this teaching – and him. He had said: *“The bread that I shall give is my flesh – for the life of the world.”* Asked how he could give people his “flesh”, he had replied: *“My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live 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 (ie. the manna) – they are dead; but anyone who eats this bread will live forever.”*

It is worth recalling why some material was included in the four gospels, and other material left out. At the start of his gospel, St Luke (or those who edited the gospel called after him) wrote: *“Many others have undertaken to draw up accounts of these events....I in my turn have decided to write an ordered account for you, so that you can see how well founded is this teaching.”* In other words, the gospel’s job is to plant and nurture faith in its readers. In the case of John 6, I suggest that in the early church there was much questioning about what the Holy Eucharist actually meant, and these words of Jesus were put in to show how “well founded” (in Luke’s words) the traditional belief was.

What is this belief? At the Last Supper, Jesus had taken & blessed the bread in the middle of the Passover Meal, and said: *“Take, eat; this is my Body.”* (Matt 26:26). Later, after the meal was largely ended, he had taken a cup of wine, given thanks and said: *“Drink of it, all of you; this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins.”* (Matt 26:27-28). He had added these words to the bread and wine taken in every Passover Meal, so I suspect that the disciples did not appreciate their meaning just then. But as the weeks went by – especially after Pentecost – they would have realized that Jesus had meant something very special by those words. They were not just a figure of speech (like calling himself the “Good Shepherd”), but a method of keeping him present – spiritually - by a special ceremony. We know that the very early Christian community copied this bit of the Last Supper,

and used Jesus' words to "bless" or "consecrate" the bread & wine. They called this the "Breaking of the Bread".

St Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-30, written about 57AD, gave the same account as in the gospel, but added: "*Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be behaving unworthily towards the body & blood of the Lord.*" In other words, 25 years after the original event, Paul taught that this ceremony gives the actual presence of Jesus in the elements of bread & wine. We think that John's gospel was put together in its final form about 80 years after Jesus' death, so the gospel's author used our Lord's words to re-state the Church's faith in Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist. I am sure many Christians would have found this just as hard to accept then, as some do now.

Finally (!) we come to this week's gospel. Having taken on board all we have seen so far, how did Jesus' hearers react? They said: "*This is intolerable language! How could anyone accept it?*" John adds, sadly: "*After this, many of his disciples left him, and stopped going with him.*" Turning to the 12, he asked if they also wished to abandon him. In a famous reply, Peter said: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? We believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.*"

The first reading tells of a similar choice by the tribes of Israel under Moses' successor, Joshua. Having successfully occupied the 'promised land', they had to decide: to continue to serve the Lord, who had rescued them from Egypt years earlier, or serve other gods? They unanimously chose the Lord. What about us? I know that many today – including some Catholics – cannot accept the Eucharist as anything more than a symbol of Jesus' love. But, if that were the case, why did Jesus' teaching in John 6 (quoted in the first paragraph) provoke such a strong reaction among his followers? Obviously, his presence in Holy Communion, while not physical, is far more than merely symbolic. At times, we simply have to believe without clear proofs – a choice for each of us.

This is not the place for a detailed explanation of the full Church teaching on the issue, so I will finish by re-stating that we believe Jesus' presence in the Eucharist to be genuine. This means that, in this sacrament, we meet the real Jesus Christ, hidden in the form of human food. For a moment after receiving Him, we should 'talk' to him: enjoying his presence, thanking him, and praying for those whom we love. I think this is the closest that any religion allows ordinary humans to get to their God. After all, as St Peter said (sort of): "Where else can we go? He is the Holy One of God." *Fr Jim Dunne.*