

21st Sunday (B)

23rd August 2015

'Will you also go away?'

Josh 24: *We have no intention of deserting the Lord our God*

Ps 33: *Taste and see that the Lord is good*

Eph 5: *Husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the Church*

Jn 6: 60–69: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life*

These past few weeks have seen a long-drawn-out reading of the 6th Chapter of St John, inserted, as it were, into the normal cycle from Mark's Gospel that we would expect in 'Year B.' But this chapter of St John is a crucial one. In fact, if I had the 'Desert-Island-Discs' option of taking just one chapter of the whole Bible to my desert island, this would be it: chapter 6 of St John. It's one of the most beautiful chapters in all Scripture, in my opinion!

It reaches its culmination today, as some of Jesus's followers object to His teaching on the Eucharist — "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" they said — and some start to drift away. Jesus's teaching is too much for them, and they will follow Him no more. And then Jesus asks the Twelve Apostles how they feel about it: "Will you go away too?" Surely, in a way, this is the crunch point? This is the make-or-break. The teaching on the Eucharist ... will they accept it or won't they? Will they say, "A man

cannot do this"? Or will they say, "This is the Son of God, He can do anything He so chooses"? It's the crunch point for Our Lord's teaching of the Apostles. It's a hard teaching, understandably; it's a new teaching. Nothing like this in Judaism could have fully prepared them for this. Yes, God fed them with manna in the desert; yes, he caused quails to appear and feed them in their long years of wandering. Yes, He fed Elijah with scones and water when it was the famine, and he was fleeing Queen Jezebel. Yes, the Jewish feast of the Passover was a ritual sacrifice and meal an annual celebration of the Exodus, their freedom from slavery. But even so, for these Jewish disciples of Jesus, nothing had prepared them — nothing could have prepared them! — for Jesus's teaching that He would feed them Himself with His very self, His Body & Blood.

It falls to St Peter, as so often: the leader — the 'Prince of the Apostles' — to give voice to the thinking of the Twelve. And I always feel as if there is a huge poignancy — the tremendous weight of history, but also of deep spiritual longing — in St Peter's voice, as he gives

Jesus a reply. He doesn't question Jesus's teaching, hard though indeed it must be to digest, but simply appeals to their experience of Him as their Rabbi and their Lord. They can trust Him, whatever. What He teaches them must simply be right. So St Peter says: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God."

Everything else in our faith follows from this statement of faith, that we believe: You, Jesus, are the Holy One of God. Our fundamental belief in the Eucharist as completely and truly the sacred flesh and precious blood of the living Son of God follows perfectly from our faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Of course there is nothing else with which to compare the Eucharist ... There is simply nothing like it on earth! Here in the humble outward forms of the Eucharist dwells, hidden, the holy and Almighty Son of God. He conceals His glory; but He reveals His sanctity to those who love Him.

The Eucharist remains, also today, the crunch point, in a way the key dogma. For Christians, it is often what

divides us. For Catholics it is crucial, to believe in the Eucharistic teaching of Jesus, expressed powerfully in this chapter of St John. To accept Our Lord's teaching is to accept Him, truly and completely, and to acknowledge that nothing Jesus says is wasted; nothing Jesus teaches is superfluous. We can hang on His every word; live our lives by His every teaching; have total trust in His guidance for life. So, when Our Lord offers us the Eucharist as His living presence, it's His greatest gift — what more could He give than Himself? — and without it we would be turning down the very life and grace that God Himself is offering us. *"Anyone who eats My flesh and drink My blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day. For 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."* Let's never belittle or despise the life-giving nature of the Eucharist. Let's live our Sunday Mass faithfully, weekly, out of deep faithful love and desire for life with Jesus. *Lord, to whom else should we go? You have the message of eternal life!*