

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (August 22, 2021)

What would it take for you to want to abandon Jesus, to decide to leave him behind? Can you even imagine such a thing? Of course I'm not suggesting anything of the sort; so no, you don't have to write to the archbishop... I raise this question because this is what happened in the gospel we just heard. This passage comes at the end of John chapter six, right after Jesus spoke over and over again about feeding on his flesh and drinking his blood—in other words, about the Eucharist. Today we hear the response of his listeners: “this saying is hard; who can accept it?” We then learn that many of Jesus' disciples left him because they did not accept it. Note also that Jesus didn't urge them to come back by watering down his teaching or making it easier for them: “wait, come back: you misunderstand—I didn't mean that flesh-and-blood thing literally”. He didn't say that; he simply asked the apostles if they wanted to leave him as well.

These readings from Jesus' Bread of Life discourse that we have heard the last few weeks from the sixth chapter of John raise a couple of very important questions that we need to think about: 1) why am I a Christian? 2) why I am Catholic? Have you ever asked yourself such questions? If not, I'd suggest and challenge all of us to do so, and on a regular basis. Don't worry—I'm not going to ask anyone right now for an answer. But maybe we can imagine some possible responses:

--“Why am I a Christian? Uh...well...er...gee...I guess I'm not sure.” Not a good answer, so let's move on...

--“Why am I Catholic? Because that's how I was raised; I've been coming to this church all my life.” Now, that's a better answer than “gee, I don't know”. And that's not a bad answer for a child or young person whose parents provided both their material and spiritual needs. But that young person grows up and begins to ask questions about what we believe and why—very important questions, by the way, because they indicate a more mature approach to such matters. And so we need deeper and more substantive answers to why we believe what we say and what we have been taught to believe.

--“Why am I Christian/Catholic? Because I'm comfortable with it; it makes me feel good.” There is indeed something to that; our faith in Jesus does indeed give us comfort and strength especially in times of struggle or crisis or great sadness. But there is so much more to Jesus than him simply leaving us feel warm and cozy inside. He said and did a whole lot of things that left his listeners and yes, even the twelve apostles, astonished and perplexed and sometimes even angry. For example:

- “love your enemies”
- “if you do not forgive others, neither will you Father forgive you”
- “anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts”
- “if you wish to be my disciple, pick up your cross each day and follow me”
- “whatever you do (or fail to do) for the least of my brothers, you do (or fail to do) for me”
- “you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”

That's not 'comfortable' stuff, folks. And unless we have reached that perfection that Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount, we should all feel more than a little bit uncomfortable. These and all the other hard teachings of Jesus are not from the 'feel good' department, but they are certainly at the heart of his gospel—and so they must also be in the heart and mind and will of the genuine follower of Jesus Christ.

And what we say about Jesus we must also say about the Church he built on the rock of St. Peter and the other apostles. Christ and his Church are a package deal; you can't have one without the other. In our second reading St. Paul speaks of the unity of the husband/wife relationship in marriage as a sign of the unity of Christ and the Church. Elsewhere in his letters Paul wrote about the Church as the Body of Christ—Jesus as the Head of that Body and we are the other parts of that Body. He gave us the Church to carry on his teachings and his gospel and to show how that gospel helps us respond to current issues and controversies. And those teachings can be hard to hear and accept—whether about abortion or immigration, sexual morality or concern for the poor and the prisoner. The Church's teaching on these and all other issues of justice and morality is neither conservative nor liberal, it is neither Republican or Democrat. Rather, they are based on the gospel of Jesus as handed on to the apostles who then handed it on to their successors in a process through history up to our own time and to the end of time.

Back to Jesus' question to the Twelve: "do you want to leave me too?" Peter's response was right on target (at least this time): "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...you are the Holy One of God." I suspect that Peter was just as clueless as the others about what Jesus meant by feeding on his flesh and drinking his blood. But he knew who and what Jesus was and is and therefore accepted the truth of his words. "Why are we Christian?" We are Christian because we agree with St. Peter that Jesus is the Son, the Holy One of God whose words are truth and eternal life. "Why are we Catholic?" We are Catholic Christians for the same reason—this same Jesus entrusted the gospel to the apostles and to the Church he established on their foundation and to whom he promised the Holy Spirit's help to lead them to all truth.

In the first reading we heard Joshua challenge the Israelites who had finally reached the Promised Land: "Decide today whom you will serve...as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." It has also been wisely said that it is not enough to choose God once for a lifetime, for we must renew our choice every day. May God grant us the desire, the grace and the wisdom to renew our choice for Jesus every single day, and to live with dedication and joy the call to lay down our lives daily for others as the Holy Spirit prompts us. That's what being Christian is all about. That's what being Catholic is all about.