

21st Sunday of Year B

(Four sermons)

A SAD MOMENT IN JESUS' LIFE

Jn. 6:60-69

In last Sunday's Gospel Jesus promised to give the people His Body and Blood to be the food of their souls. He could not have made His message any clearer. But they failed to understand what He said. He said, "If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you will not have life in you." In today's Gospel we see the response the people gave to Jesus. Many said, "This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?"

If this was the first meeting of these people with Jesus and He spoke about giving His flesh to eat and His blood to drink, and if I was among that crowd, I think I would be first in line to say, "I just don't believe what I am hearing! How can a man make such a claim? How can he give us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink?" But this wasn't the first meeting with these people. Jesus is not an unreasonable Man. He had come among them and had done many extraordinary things – the blind were given back their sight, He made the dumb speak and the deaf hear, by the touch of His hand He cleansed lepers. He even brought the dead back to life. These very people had seen Him feed 5000 people on a few fish and loaves of bread. Now when He made this claim of giving them His flesh to eat and His blood to drink their response should have been, "Gosh! Is there anything this Man cannot do? He is certainly an extraordinary Man! No one has ever done what He has and so I'll give Him a hearing and I'll go along with Him." Instead they said, "This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?"

After they complained Jesus said these words to His Apostles, "Does this upset you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before?" Why did He make reference to His Ascension? It was His way of saying, "When the time comes for Me to return to Heaven and to My glory, then you will see that what I claim is true." It means that the Resurrection is the guarantee of all the claims of Jesus. All the claims He made were vindicated by the fact that He died and rose again. The Resurrection is the proof of the indestructibility of the claims of Jesus.

And so, the followers of Jesus had now come to a fork in the road, at which point they split up and headed in different directions. The fork in the road was Christ. Some of them decided to go with Him, and some decided to go without Him. There was a time when it looked as if everyone, apart from the religious authorities, would flock to Him. But gradually the tone of things had changed. From now on there was a growing hatred for Him which was going to culminate in the Cross. Some drifted from Him for they saw clearly where Jesus was heading. It was not possible to challenge the authorities as He did and think you can get away with it. He was heading for disaster and they got out in time.

Also, in this passage Jesus mentions that He knew who would betray Him. Jesus was seeing a gradual drifting of His Apostle Judas from Him. There must have been a time when Jesus saw in Judas, the making of an Apostle, a man whom He could use for His purposes. Judas, who might have become the hero, instead became the villain, the traitor.

You must have heard that story of the artist who wanted to paint the Last Supper. He had models for Jesus and all the Apostles except Judas. He was particularly happy with his model of Jesus. His face expressed holiness and purity. For years the painting was incomplete because he couldn't find a Judas. He searched in the lowest haunts of the city and in the dens of vice. At last he found a man who had the face of what looked like a hardened criminal. He asked him to sit for a painting. When he had completed the painting, the man said, "You painted me before." "I don't think so," said the artist. "You did. The last

time you painted me, it was as Christ!" A life of crime had completely changed his appearance. Sad to say Judas had changed from an Apostle to the one who betrayed Him.

Our passage, though it has its tragedy, ends on a happy note. When Jesus saw so many leave Him, He asked the Twelve, "Do you want to go away too?" Once again it was Peter who was their spokesman. He could see the sadness in Jesus' eyes and without any hesitation he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter's loyalty was based on a personal relationship with Jesus. There were many things that Peter did not understand. He was just as bewildered and puzzled as anyone else, but there was something about Jesus for which he would willingly die. Let us thank Peter for His loyalty and for giving Jesus His support which He needed at this moment.

At the Last Supper before Jesus changed bread and wine into His Body and Blood, He said some revealing words which we should carry in our minds and hearts whenever we make our way to receive Holy Communion. The words are, "I have longed to have this meal with you." Here was our loving God, not just any monarch or personality, saying these words, but God Himself. It was as if from all eternity He had been waiting for this moment to give us His Body and Blood to be the food and drink of our souls. The only response that Jesus wants from us is love. Does He get it? Jesus once told a saint, "When people receive Me in Holy Communion, they tell me about their troubles and they ask Me for help, but very few say these three little words which I long to hear, "I love You!"

Lord Jesus, from today and every day when we receive You in Holy Communion, we will never fail to say those three little words, "I love You!"

THE GREATEST DAILY MIRACLE

Joshua 24:1-2,15-17,18; Eph. 5:21-32 & Jn. 6:60-69

Acceptance of the truth is a necessary requirement for unity. On recent Sundays, we have listened to Our Lord's teaching of the truth about the Eucharist; namely, that by giving us His own Flesh and Blood, He has given all the food for the life of the world. However, in today's Gospel we hear sad news that some of His disciples refused to accept this truth, and so broke away from Him. They relied on their own human reason and were stumped by the question, "How can anyone accept it?" "How could Jesus give His Body and Blood as food?" Our Lord would not water down His teaching just to please them. If they refused to accept the truth and wanted to leave, then the choice, sad though it was, was entirely theirs.

Next, Our Lord turned to Peter and the apostles and asked, "Will you leave Me, too?" Peter's answer demonstrates his faith in Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe that You are the Holy One of God." Now, Peter's understanding of how Jesus could give us His Body and Blood was no better than that of the disciples who left. But for Peter the "how" did not matter. What mattered was that Jesus had said it and that was enough. Notice that Peter's simple faith accepted the Eucharistic mystery in a way which reason couldn't. We, too, with our puny little minds, cannot understand how the miracle of the Eucharist takes place. However, like Peter, let us make a simple act of faith. Jesus is the Truth, He has the message of eternal life, and He has told us that the Eucharist is His Body and Blood. So, let us accept His word purely and simply.

History tends to repeat itself with time. In the Middle Ages, some Christians began to doubt and question the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Church, however, reiterated the truth by establishing the Feast of Corpus Christi, and the saintly theologian St. Thomas Aquinas composed hymns in praise of the Body and Blood of Christ. Then again in the 16th

century reformation, Christian communities broke away from Rome disagreeing, among other things, with the teaching on the Eucharist. They denied that the Mass was a sacrifice and argued that the Eucharist was not the Real Presence of Christ, but namely a memory, or a symbol of the person of Jesus. So, the Church had to reaffirm Christ's teaching through decrees of the Council of Trent.

Given that the Churches of the Reformation broke away from the Roman Catholic Church disagreeing on key aspects of our faith, as well as on the authority of the Pope it is understandable why the Catholic Church forbids the sharing of Communion between ourselves and other Christian denominations like Anglican, Methodists and Lutheran Churches. Since the Eucharist is the sign of complete unity, it would be hypocritical to share the Eucharist when this unity is lacking in the areas of faith and authority. So, for example, if a non-Catholic comes to our Church not believing in the Real Presence, how can the priest say "Body of Christ" and accept the reply "Amen"? Even if the person did believe in the Real Presence, as some High Anglicans do, the fact that they are separated from Rome makes it rather meaningless to receive Communion. Conversely, for the same reason, Catholics cannot receive Communion in Christian Churches, but there is also a more serious reason: these other Christian denominations which broke away at the Reformation lack the apostolic succession of Bishops. Without this apostolic succession, their priests are not validly ordained; and without a valid priesthood, it is not possible to have the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

For all these reasons, inter-communion is disallowed. It is true that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and so this inability to share communion does cause pain. But this pain is a reflection of the pain of disunity. We cannot paper over the cracks and short circuit the path of unity by resorting to inter-communion. Meanwhile let us be content with receiving a blessing in each other's Churches, and let the pain of separation spur us on to pray for unity, so that one day we may be united in the one Church and share the Body and Blood of Christ.

Lord Jesus, we pray for the day when we will all be one, believing in what You want us to believe, that our Pope is the head of Your Church, the Catholic Church and that You are truly present in the Holy Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine. We ask You to give the gift of faith to all.

WHERE WOULD WE BE WITHOUT CHRIST?

Jn. 6:60-69

Our Gospel reading tells us the story of a group of people who came to a fork in the road, at which point they split up and headed in different directions. The fork in the road was Christ. Some decided to go with Him, and some decided to go without Him.

That is the kind of person Jesus is. His very presence in our world demands a decision. We cannot be neutral about Him. We must go through life either with Him or without Him. If a person decides to leave Christ out of their life, that decision is sure to make a vast difference to the quality and content, the success or failure of their life.

In today's Gospel we are told, "Many of His disciples left Him and stopped going with Him." What happened to them we don't know. We can only wonder what kind of lives they led. I am sure had they stayed with Christ that the quality of their lives would have been happier and more satisfied.

If we didn't have Christ in our lives, how would we cope with life's problems? I would like to put forward three questions. First, where would we go for our ideas of truth? Simon Peter was confronted with this question and this was his answer, 'Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life.' Peter could speak like this because the faith given to him

by God the Father and his own experience of Jesus told him that everything Jesus had said was true. After all this how could he and the Apostles ever leave Him?

The same is true for you and me, Christ is more than a mere word. He is the one who gives meaning to our life. Whenever we think of truth, we have to think of Him. Where would we be without truths like the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount or the story of the Good Samaritan? All these truths have touched our lives. We know that we will never measure up to the ideals they set, but at least we know we must try. It is Christ who gives the standard of truth by which to measure our lives. If we set it aside, what have we to put in its place?

The second question we have to ask ourselves is this, if we leave out Christ how do we cope with the fact of sin? It is Christ who makes us aware of our sinfulness. By His teaching and goodness, He gives us a standard by which to measure our lives. There are times when we try to ignore our sins or make light of them, but when we look at Christ, we have to admit that we are sinners. If we leave Christ out of our lives we lack that awareness of sin and so deprive ourselves of forgiveness which we all desperately need. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Experience has taught us that that isn't easy, but it works. Forgiveness is the only thing in the world that will really take care of the sin problem. Only Jesus can forgive sins and He has given His Church the power to forgive sins. If we do leave Christ out of life, then what will we do with our sins?

The third question we need to ask is, if we leave Christ out, what will we do with the fact of death? Some people try to evade the issue by claiming that death is the end and there is nothing beyond it. They say, "Make the most of this life and enjoy yourself." If they are honest with themselves, they will realise that none of the pleasures of this life can satisfy the deepest desires of their hearts. Experience has taught us that by making Christ the centre of our lives and making His standards ours we find fulfilment. We need Christ's words in order to possess eternal life. It is He who tells us that with Him we can live forever. Armed with this promise, we can face not only our own death, but also the death our loved ones. For those who do not know Christ, death is a dreadful blow which is utterly futile.

Lord Jesus, if we leave You out of our lives where do we go for our ideas of truth, or solve our problem of sin, or face the fact of death? I hope like Peter, we'll be able to say, "You have the message of eternal life."

WE HAVE TO MAKE A CHOICE

Jos. 24:1-2, 15-18 and Jn. 6:60-69

Have you ever thought how you would have behaved if you had been living at the time of Jesus, particularly when things were not going well for Him? Would you have been for Him or against Him? It must have been easy for the Pharisees to join together and defend their traditional religious practices against the teachings of a radical young carpenter. It must have been easy for the Sadducees to react angrily when He disrupted their profits in the Temple. It must have been easy for people in Pilate's courtyard to cry for His blood, when everyone seemed to be doing it. It must have been easy for the soldiers who drove nails through His hands to tell themselves that they were only doing their job. Where do you think you and I would have stood with regard to Jesus, if we had been there from the beginning?

The people in today's Gospel had to make such a decision. Were they going to side with Jesus or not? We are told that many of them never walked with Him again when He told them that His flesh was real food and His blood was real drink, and that if they wanted to live forever, they would have to eat His flesh and drink His blood. The twelve Apostles decided

they would stay. Would we have gone with the majority or would we have stayed with the Twelve? How many of us are glad that we were not there to have had to make that decision?

It would be interesting to know why those people decided to quit, but I think it is even more interesting as to why the Apostles decided to stay. Jesus asked the Apostles point blank, "What about you, do you want to go away too?" I'm sure Peter saw the sadness in Jesus' eyes. He had been grooming these people by His instructions and miracles for the time when He would announce the great gift of Himself that He was to give them in the Holy Eucharist. Now that He had offered it to them, they walked away from Him. I'm sure Peter realised how heartbroken Jesus was and so he quickly answered for them all, "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that You are the Holy One of God." This was a critical moment for the Apostles, but they had made up their minds, they decided to stay. The only reason for that decision was that they had come to believe in Jesus as the Holy One of God. It was not so much that they held on to Him as He held on to them. He had a grip on their minds and hearts that they could not easily shake loose. What kind of hold does Jesus have on you and me?

Sooner or later something gets a hold on every one of us. We cannot live very long in this world without some compelling influence taking hold of our lives. What is it in your life and mine? In the Old Testament reading we see Joshua confronting the people of Israel to make a choice. He stood before them and said, "Choose today whom you wish to serve. As for me and my House we will serve the Lord." That is the kind of option that faces all of us. We all have a choice as to whom or what we will serve. From the day we came into this world, all sorts of things start reaching out with strong hands trying to get a hold on our lives. Sooner or later something gets us. With some people it is drugs, alcohol, sexual exploitation, the love of money and a growing sense of utter futility. With others, it is devotion to family, loyalty to friends, a high vocation or some worthy cause. Something gets us. If it is not faith, its fear; if it is not hope, then despair; if not love, then selfishness. These are the facts of life.

The Apostles could not leave Jesus because Jesus had captivated their hearts. If our choice is Jesus like the Apostles, we will find that being captured by Jesus is the most liberating experience we will ever know. At first it might sound confining and oppressive but we shall see it is not so. Michelangelo was captured by art, yet he had the freedom to express the genius within him. A man who gives himself to drink excessively is no longer free. All he can do is to drink himself to death. It is Christ who can captivate people and bring the best out of them. Ask St. Paul the secret of his great life, and he would answer, "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I now live is not mine, but Christ lives in me." Paul was a great man whose accomplishments we will never equal. The message he, Peter and the rest of the Apostles offer us is that even ordinary men and women like themselves can be captivated by Jesus. They became great because they belonged to something far greater than themselves. They made their choice and were captivated by Jesus.

Lord Jesus, let us make our choice for You and say with Peter, "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God."