

Twenty-first Sunday O T Cycle B August 26, 2018

For several weeks now we have been listening to excerpts from the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John. The whole chapter is devoted to Jesus as the Bread of life. Today's reading brings us to the closing part of that great discourse of Jesus. It is a moment of great crisis in the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus has been telling those who have been following him that he is the Bread of Life. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you" [Jn. 6, 53]. Many of his disciples found his language revolting. They failed to perceive the spiritual meaning of Jesus' words. It was just too hard to accept. They had been following him for some time, but now they turned back from following Jesus. They were willing to follow him when he gave them bread to eat, as in the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They wanted more of that kind of bread, but now they were refusing to accept Jesus offering himself to them as their bread. Those who turned away from him were not only rejecting his message; they were rejecting Jesus. Does Jesus water down his message in order to win them back? Does he try to soften it? Not at all! He rebukes them for their lack of faith.

The full acceptance of Jesus stands or falls upon the acceptance of this great teaching. The Jesus who is now offering his flesh to eat is the same Jesus who had provided bread for the multitudes to eat. They are indivisibly one and the same. This is clearly a core teaching for Jesus. It is for Jesus non-negotiable.

Then Jesus turns to the twelve- that is all he has got left now, just the twelve- and asks them, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter, whose faith in Jesus has been growing ever since he first met Jesus, speaks up: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" [Jn. 6, 68-69].

Peter's faith has been growing all along. He has now come to the great realization: When you have Jesus, you have everything. In Jesus you have not only the One who has the words of eternal life. You have the Holy One of God. You have God himself. St. Theresa of Avila wrote, "Whoever has God wants for nothing. God alone is enough."

"Turning away from God is not good for the soul" [Bishop Robert Barron]. History and our own experience tell us that it doesn't go well with us when we turn away from

God. Yet culturally, we are pushing God further and further away. Our colleges and universities are supposed to be places where minds are encouraged to be open in the search for truth. Yet students entering colleges and universities are made to feel that if they are believers they must be somewhat irrational, when in fact there is no real conflict between reason and faith. Some students are courageous enough to stand up and resist the steamroller of culture. Students are not the only ones having to deal with the secular culture. We all do.

So what are we to do? What we need to do to come to Jesus, or if you have turned away from him, to turn back to him. Jesus turns no one away who comes to him. The Psalmist today invites all of us: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Only someone who has come to know the Lord can say something like that. It was because he had come to know Jesus that Peter was unwilling to turn away from him. Peter had begun to taste the goodness of the Lord, and he was not about to turn away from it and start looking for something else.

How do we come to taste the goodness of the Lord? We might ask ourselves, "What am I looking for? Am I willing to take seriously my own questions and to make the effort to investigate and find answers to those questions? Peter said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life." How willing are you to invest your time and energy into listening to the words of Jesus as Peter did? Are you willing to read and study the Gospels? How willing are you to go with Jesus and pray with him as Peter and the disciples did long ago?

Nothing much in the spiritual life happens without prayer. "It is faith, love and adoration that place us in contact with God" [Jacques Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, p. 42]. In prayer, Jesus not only discloses himself to us but he also awakens us to the hunger in our hearts for him. There is a deep hunger in our hearts for God. That is why Jesus insisted upon praying without ceasing. Jesus, the Holy One of God, Jesus wants to satisfy that hunger. The great prayer today is the prayer of the Divine Liturgy wherein we join our hearts and minds with Jesus in his offering of himself to the Heavenly Father, and in doing so we receive from God the One who is the Bread of Life.

It is important to think deeply about things and not accept everything that our culture serves up to us. Much of it is toxic to the soul. We are often left feeling that nothing is sacred, not even human life. "Our societies are hurting, because there is no spiritual depth to them" [Romeo Dallaire].

The remedy is found not in turning away from God, but in turning toward him. Faith, love, prayer and careful listening to the words of Jesus get us moving in the right direction.

Faith is a gift, but it is also a choice we make. Our future is being shaped by the choices we make today.

Long ago Joshua challenged the Israelites of old to make a choice: "Choose this day whom you will serve." How did they respond? They said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.... We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

Dear friends, what choice will you make today?

Father Neil