

The Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Joshua 24:1-2, 15-17, 18
<i>Response</i>	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 5:21-32
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life; you have the words of everlasting life.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:60-69

The 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B brings to a close the church's journey through five weeks of studying the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. In some ways this really is the climax of our study of what Jesus has to say in his famous Bread of Life Discourse. So this Sunday we're going to be looking at the Gospel of John and at how people respond to everything we've heard over the last four weeks from Jesus regarding eating his flesh, drinking his blood and being the bread of life who is given for the sake of salvation for the life of the world. So the reading for today, the Gospel reading for today, is from John 6 once more. This time we're going to pick up where we left off though with verse 60 and the reaction to Jesus' words in the synagogue at Capernaum. So in John 6:60 and following we read these words:

Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you that do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him,

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."¹

Okay, so that's the response to Jesus' bread of life discourse and you might've noticed a couple of things as you were working through it. First, at the very first verse when it says many of his disciples, when they heard this or when they heard it, that's a specific reference to what he had just said in the synagogue at Capernaum. You know, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you, my flesh is real food, my blood is real drink. Those are the words to which this reading is referring in that first verse. Second, notice how the disciples respond, this is a hard saying, who can listen to it, right. So the offensiveness of Jesus's words in the synagogue are highlighted there. Then a third aspect of this that's really important is Jesus' statements about spirit and life. What does he mean the flesh is of no avail, the words I've spoken to you are spirit and life? How do we interpret that? In my experience that verse often gives Catholics a lot of trouble, because it sounds at least at first glance like Jesus is maybe saying here that everything he's just said is metaphorical or allegorical, or something like that, so we want to look at that carefully. Then, fourth and finally, I want to highlight the fact that after this discourse, many of Jesus' disciples abandon him, they leave him. So this is a pretty significant moment in the public ministry of Jesus because what we see here is a kind of fallout from his Bread of Life Discourse. A fallout that's negative in the sense that many of the people who have traveled with Jesus and heard him say a lot of shocking things up to this point, for them this is the breaking point, this is where they draw the line. This is where they stop following him, they stop being his disciples and they go away because of what he said in the Capernaum discourse. So let's just walk through each of those points and just make sure we understand what they're about.

First, why do the disciples say that this is a hard saying, who can listen to it? Well recall last Sunday, we were looking at the language of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood and one of the things I highlighted was that in Leviticus 17 the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Law of Moses is very clear that the people of Israel were prohibited from drinking blood. So that statement about drinking his blood would've been a very, very difficult saying for them to grasp. It would've been offensive not just for them to accept, but even to hear someone talk like that would've been a very, very difficult saying because it sounds, at least a first glance, like Jesus is overthrowing the Law of Moses. And remember, the disciples are Jews, he's saying this in a Jewish synagogue, everyone would be familiar with the law. So that's the difficulty that they're encountering there. This is a hard saying, how can we even listen to it? And in response, notice what else happens here. Second, it says that Jesus knew within himself that some of the disciples murmured at it, right. Now whenever John uses that language of murmuring, that's an allusion to the Book of Exodus 16, because the Israelites in the desert murmured at Moses and murmured at God when they were complaining about their hunger in the desert and complaining about the manna in the wilderness. So that's just one more echo that John wants you to keep thinking about the manna even when it comes to the response to Jesus' bread of life discourse, don't forget the manna, it's going to be important.

Third, notice Jesus recognizes that what he's just said here is an offensive statement, you know. He says do you take offense at this. But at that moment, right when he's recognizing that they've been offended by it, that would be the time where if he was just speaking metaphorically he would need to clarify what the nature of his teaching is. But notice what he says, he does something interesting. He says, what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? Now most readers, in my experience, when they get to this passage they hop over that verse. They just blow right by it even though that is what he follows his statement about offense with, right. So he says are you offended, then I've got a question for you. Here's the question, what if you were to see me, the Son of Man, ascending to where I was before? Now what does that mean? Well it's pointing to two different things. First, he's pointing them to his resurrected and glorified body after his death and Resurrection in which he would ascend into heaven. Second, he's pointing them to his divinity when he says ascending to where he was before. In other words, he's pointing them to the fact that he existed before he came down from heaven. He's bringing up the image again of his heavenly identity, that's he's not just a man, he is the God-man, he is the word incarnate, right. So he's pointing them to the Resurrection and to his divinity. So he's saying, are you offended by

this? Then what if you were to see my Resurrection and my glory and you were to recall that I am from heaven, that I am the God-man, that I am the one who's come down from heaven, right. And it's in that context that Jesus says the famous words and the kind of crucial statement, the difficult statement, in verse 63: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

Alright, pause right here, because that verse, John 6:63, is the verse that really in a sense divides the way most Protestant Christians and Catholic Christians have read this chapter. As we've seen over the course of these five weeks, the Catholic Church interprets Jesus' words realistically. We believe that when he talked about his flesh being real food and his blood being real drink that he meant it. He wasn't just speaking metaphorically, he wasn't just speaking allegorically, he was speaking sacramentally and realistically. Protestant Christians however have a different take. They think that Jesus is using the bread of life as a metaphor for his teaching, for his presence, usually for his teaching primarily, and that he doesn't actually mean it realistically or sacramentally. And, usually non-Catholic Christians will point to this verse as kind of the foundation for their interpretation. I'll frequently get asked this question by my Catholic students, you know, why don't Protestant Christians or non-Catholic Christians see the realism of John 6? I mean everything we've seen makes it real clear that he's talking about real food, real drink, the real presence in the Eucharist. And what I always try to bring them back to is this verse. You have to understand that this is kind of the lens through which they see the entire chapter.

In fact, I've found it very helpful in this regard to actually quote one of the first Protestant reformers in his interpretation of these verses. His name was Ulrich Zwingli. And Zwingli, he's not as famous as Martin Luther and John Calvin, those were the two famous Protestant reformers, most people think of them if they think of the Reformation, but Zwingli was very influential with his writings and he also had a pretty powerful influence on the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions, which have lots of influence and descendants in the United States. So if you know a Baptist person, they belong to a congregation that has its intellectual roots in Ulrich Zwingli's thought, among other places. So this is what Zwingli had to say about this verse. So I want you to hear, in this case, a Protestant reformer in his

own words, how he interpreted this verse and how it colored the way he saw all of John 6:

“Now I want no one to suffer himself to be offended by this painstaking examination of words; for it is not upon them that I rely, but upon the one expression ‘The flesh profiteth nothing’ (Jn 6:63). This expression is strong enough to prove that ‘is’ in this passage is used for ‘signifies’ or ‘is a symbol of’, even if the discourse itself contained absolutely nothing by which the meaning here could be detected... I have now refuted, I hope, this senseless notion about bodily flesh.”²

Okay, so what does Zwingli mean when he says that? What he’s saying is this, in essence, I don't need John 6:1-62. I don't care what those verses say. All I need is this one verse, the flesh is of no avail, or the flesh profits nothing, or the flesh is useless; you can translate it a number of different ways. What he says is that verse, that part of the verse alone is sufficient to show that the whole discourse just means symbolizes or signifies. And when Jesus says the bread which I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world, he doesn't actually mean ‘is’, he just means symbolizes, right. So what is Zwingli doing? He's taking a text out of context and using it as a pretext for interpreting the whole passage in a metaphorical way. So already that should be a clue to you that that's an erroneous interpretation.

Whenever somebody takes one verse or just a part of the verse out of context and says the rest of the verses don't matter, that's a sign to you that their interpretation is weak, that it doesn't actually...it can't take into account all of the data, all of the evidence in the Scripture passage. As Catholics, one of the things that’s distinctive about our interpretation is that we always try to put verses in context, right. So if I want to know what John 6:63 means, I don't do like Zwingli did and take it out of the context. I do the opposite; I put it into context and ask, what does it mean in light of everything else that Jesus has just said in the passage? That's how you interpret people's words correctly, right? You look at them in context. And sure enough, when we do that, when we read Jesus’ words in context, we see that Zwingli is completely wrong for a number of reasons. So let’s just walk through them.

² See O’Connor, *The Hidden Manna*, 144

First, number one, when Jesus says, “it is the spirit that gives life, the words I’ve spoken to you are spirit and life,” it’s real important to remember that in John's Gospel the Greek word spirit, *pneuma*, does not mean metaphorical. Think about it, if you go back to John 4, in John 4 Jesus says God is spirit, God is *pneuma*. Now does that mean that God is a metaphor? Well obviously no, Jesus is not saying that. For First Century Jews, and for Christians throughout all of history, the Spirit is not less real than the material, it’s more real than the material because God himself is pure spirit, okay. So when Jesus is saying that his words are spirit and life, it does not mean they’re metaphorical. When Jesus says it is the spirit that gives life, he doesn't mean that metaphors give life, he’s talking about the Holy Spirit that gives life to his body in the Resurrection. Remember the context is the Resurrection, first point.

Second, when Jesus says the flesh is of no avail, the Greek word there *ho sarx* is also used elsewhere in the gospel, so we can see what it means. This might be technical but it’s real important for you to get this. Jesus does not say “my flesh” is of no avail, that’s really critical. In fact, in context, five times before this verse he has said “my flesh” is necessary for salvation, you have to eat “my flesh.” Unless you eat “my flesh” you have no life in you. So over and over Jesus said “my flesh,” “my flesh,” “my flesh.” “My flesh” is necessary for salvation. So in 6:63 when he comes and says “the flesh,” he’s talking about something distinct, right. He’s not saying “my flesh” is useless, so what does he mean? Well we have to put it in context. If you go a couple of chapters forward in John 8:15, Jesus uses the same expression “the flesh”, *ho sarx*, and this is what he says to the Pharisees. “You judge according to the flesh [*ho sarx*], I judge no one.” What does he mean there? Well some translations say, actually render this, they say you judge according to appearances. And that’s actually not a bad interpretation because when he says you judge according to the flesh what he’s saying to the Pharisees is you judge me and think that I'm just a man because you're just looking at appearances, right. But if you just look at appearances you're only going to see my humanity and you're going to miss my divinity. If you judge according to the flesh, meaning this fallen world, this material world, without taking into account the spirit of God, without taking into account the Incarnation, you’re going to misunderstand who Jesus is. Likewise too, go back to John 6 in context then, when Jesus says “the flesh is

useless,” he's talking about this fallen world, he's talking about appearances, right. So think about it with reference to the sacrament, you know, the bread appears to be bread, the wine appears to be wine, but if you judge it just by appearances, guess what? You're going to miss it, you're going to miss the reality.

So in context here what does Jesus mean? He's saying his flesh is necessary for salvation but that if we want to understand his words we can't judge them according to the flesh. The flesh is useless, right, but the words I've spoken to you are spirit and life. So what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before, would you then believe, would you then understand? In other words here, when Jesus uses the expression spirit and life to refer to the Bread of Life Discourse, he's trying to give them a clue to understanding the mystery of the real presence. Namely, that when he will give them the Eucharist it will not be his dead corpse that people will be cannibalizing, it will not be that kind of flesh, right, the flesh of a dead man, it will be his crucified and resurrected body. It will be his crucified and risen flesh which is now living through the power of the Spirit and which in his resurrected and ascended state can be made present anywhere, any time, under whatever form he wills. Think about it, in the Gospel of Luke, once Jesus is raised from the dead, he can appear whenever he wants to, wherever he wants to. He can veil himself, he can hide himself and then reveal himself like on the road to Emmaus, because his body is in a new and glorified state. So when the disciples take offense at Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, when the Jews take offense at his words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, if some of them think that he's talking about cannibalizing his dead corpse, what he does is correct them, help them to see I'm not talking about eating the flesh of a dead man, I'm talking about eating the flesh of the crucified and resurrected Son of Man who will ascend into heaven and enter into eternity, and from eternity he will be able to offer himself wherever he wants, on every altar in the world under the appearance of food and drink; true food, true drink, real food, real drink, that is actually his body and his blood. That's the key.

Now did the disciples understand this at this point? No I don't think so. In fact if you keep going, Jesus says I understand that there are some of you who don't believe and he knows from the first, John says, who it was that would not believe and who it was that would betray him — interesting little allusion there by John to

Judas. This has led some interpreters to infer that John here is giving us a clue that Judas did not believe Jesus' discourse on the bread of life. In other words, one of the cracks in the windshield of Judas' faith was that he refused to accept Jesus' teaching on the real presence in the Eucharist and that was, in a sense, the beginning or one of the elements that led to his ultimate fall and betrayal. And then he also says this, verse 65, that's why I said that no one can come to me unless it's granted him by the Father. What does that mean? This is so crucial. What Jesus is saying there is that we need grace to understand and accept the teaching of the real presence. This is not something you figure out because you're really, really smart. You need the Father to give you that grace, to draw you into that mystery of who Christ is and what he's giving us in the Eucharist. It's not something we can do on our own power. It's truly a gift of God's providence. So if you believe in the Eucharist, if you accept the real presence of Christ, then say a prayer of thanksgiving to God because that's a gift that you've received from the Lord. It's a gift of faith that he's given you into a supernatural mystery that transcends our ability to understand and to comprehend it fully. And sure enough, not everybody accepts that grace and after this it says many of Jesus' disciples left him, right. So this was a bad public relations moment for Jesus in his ministry, lots of people who've been with him up to this point left.

Then he does something shocking, he turns to the 12 and says, do you too wish to leave? And at this moment Peter does something very profound. He says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we've come to believe, and to know, that you are the Holy One of God." I don't know if you recall from one of my earlier videos on the first weeks of John 6, but I was talking about how Jesus talks about believing in his divinity before he talks about believing in the Eucharist, right. Believing in who he is as a necessary prerequisite to believing in what he does in the sacrament. Peter shows that precedence there of believing in who he is because Peter is able to accept Jesus' teaching because he knows who he is. Lord you are the Holy One of God, we believe it, we know it. And what he's effectively saying here is I don't understand what you just said, I can't comprehend what you've just said, but I know who you are and I know that you speak the truth. Therefore, I'm going to trust you, I'm going to believe what you've said about eating your body and drinking your blood even if I can't comprehend it.

Okay, so that is the Gospel reading for today. There's a lot going on there. I'm not going to spend as much time on the Old Testament and Psalm but I do want to at least make a few points about them. So if you go back to the first reading for today, it's from the Book of Joshua 24. So let's read that verse, the selected verses, and then we'll ask ourselves what's the connection:

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, `Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphra'tes, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land; therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."³

Alright, so what's going on here? Well basically this is the climax of the Book of Joshua, right. Joshua's come to the end of his time of his life as leader of the Israelites and he's leaving them with a decision, are you going to serve the gods of the nations or are you going to serve idols or are you going serve the Lord, who lead us fourth out of the land of Egypt, who performed signs and wonders? So make a choice. I think the reason that the church picks this passage for the beginning, for the first reading, on this 21st Sunday is because there's a thematic link here. Just as Joshua is calling upon the Israelites, the 12 tribes, to make a choice about whether they're going to serve the Lord or not in the Old Testament,

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so too Jesus, who by the way his Greek name *Yesous* is simply the form of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*, Joshua. So Jesus literally is the new Joshua, is calling the 12 apostles to make a choice. Are you going to listen to the word of the Lord that I have given you? Or are you going to murmur against my teaching and fall away? So both texts point to a moment of decision, a moment of crisis, a moment of judgment as to whether we're going to serve the Lord or whether we're going to go our own way.

I just think that's a really, at first it's not obvious, but it's a really powerful choice. It's a really powerful typology between Joshua calling the 12 tribes to make a choice and Jesus, the new Joshua, calling the 12 apostles to make a choice as to whether they're going to serve him or not. Because let's face it, the teaching on the Eucharist continues to be controversial to this day. It continues to divide Christians to this day. It continues to keep many people out of the catholic and apostolic church to this day. People just cannot accept this offensive teaching, this hard teaching that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist and that it really is his body, his blood, his soul, and his divinity. And yet we are called by Christ to have faith, to trust him, to believe that he has the words of eternal life. And that's kind of the thematic bridge, for the Psalm today too is from Psalm 34:

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord. We've seen that Psalm used over several weeks during this cycle in John 6 for Year B because the church is constantly trying to remind us that the mystery of the Eucharist is nothing less than God's goodness in action, giving to us the greatest gift of all which is the gift of his Son in the Eucharist.

So I'll close here with a final quote from Pope John Paul II, St. John Paul II. The last encyclical St. John Paul II wrote before he died in 2005 was *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, it was his encyclical letter on the Holy Eucharist. And for me personally that letter was helpful in helping me understand the mystery of Eucharist because John Paul II points in that encyclical to the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ as a key to understanding the mystery of the real presence. So

let me read to you these words from John Paul II, this is from *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, paragraph 18:

In the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jn 6:54). This pledge of the resurrection comes from the fact that the flesh of the Son of Man, given as food, *is his body in its glorious state after the resurrection*. With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the “secret” of the resurrection.⁴

Powerful, beautiful words. And I think for me at least that helps me to understand how is it that Jesus who died on a cross 2000 years ago can give me his flesh today. Well in part it's because he is the God-man and he is the resurrected Son of God. He has been crucified and raised, and so now that he's ascended into heavenly glory he can give me his body, which is now transcending time and space, right, in its glorious state after the Resurrection. It's the living flesh of Christ that is given to us on the altar every time we receive holy Communion, every time the priest says the words “this is my body, this is my blood,” and we receive that mystery, we digest, as it were, the secret of the Resurrection.

⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* no. 18