

HUNGRY – FOR ETERNAL LIFE

TEXT: John 6:56-69

Today we come to the end of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. We have encountered people who were hungry for food without knowing that filling their bellies would not be enough to satisfy their souls. Then we met the folks who needed direction in understanding that the bread that was sent to the wilderness wanderers and to those on the Galilean hillside was bread from heaven, bread from God, again satisfying their physical hunger. Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell the crowds that he is the Bread of Life and that when we participate in Holy Communion we are privileged to eat and drink of Christ himself. This is the bread that brings us into direct communion with Christ in the holy act of eating and drinking of the body of Christ.

But John gives us one more treatise on hunger. He gives us the critical modifier in this entire exposition of Jesus as bread – *the bread of life*. And this is the not just of life, but the bread of *Eternal Life*.

Life is such a perplexing thing. If you are like me, there will have been times in your life, and maybe even constantly, when you have asked: “What is it all about? What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of my existence?”

These are not new questions; these are age-old philosophical and religious conundrums. They are also incredibly personal and perplexing questions. They are about validating who we are and what we are doing – justifying our existence.

As Jesus conversed with the people of his day in the synagogue at Capernaum about issues of the meaning of life, he makes the claim that those who eat of his flesh will live. He claims that through his connection with God, the one whom he called his Father, he offers spirit and life. It is spirit and it is life that comes to us as a gift.

From the beginning of John's gospel, John has sought to help his audience understand that Jesus is the eternal Word of God through whom all things came into being and who, in sharing in our existence, affirms the life that we have received as a gift. We do not have to validate or justify ourselves; we are simply invited to life as we were created to live.

But in our readings these past three weeks, the crowds refuse to understand. And not only the crowds, but Jesus' own disciples turn away from him. And there are times in our own lives where we too want to say just what they were saying: "This is s hard saying, who can listen to it".

These are the times when it is easier to identify with the crowds who misunderstand and question Jesus. Because what Jesus has been saying, and what we have heard these past four weeks, is indeed hard to listen to and harder to understand. That Jesus is the bread of life? That he provides the only food which truly nourishes? That he gives us his own self, even his own flesh and blood, to sustain us on our journey? These are hard words, hard to hear, hard to comprehend, hard to believe.

No wonder then, that many of those following after Jesus desert him. Note that John calls these folks not simply "the crowds", as in earlier passages, but rather "disciples". The people in today's reading who now desert Jesus are precisely those who had, in fact, believed in Jesus, those who had followed him and had given up much to do so. But now, finally, after all their waiting and watching and wondering and worrying, they have grown tired, and they can no longer see clearly what it was about Jesus that attracted them to him in the first place – and so they leave.

Who can blame them? More to the point, are we really all that different? I mean, who here has not at one time or another wondered whether you have believed in vain? During the dark of the night, perhaps, watching and praying by the bedside of a child or grandchild in the hospital, wondering why he or she is so sick. Or in the early part of the morning maybe, waking up alone and wondering why your spouse has left you? Or in

the latter part of the afternoon, perhaps, while cooking supper and thinking about your family – so full of ill-will toward each other – and wondering why things have not turned out the way you hoped and whether they ever will.

I think there are many times in our lives when we are ready to give up on our beliefs, our hopes, our dreams. We look for God, for some sense that there is a God, and we have such a hard time seeing God that we also are tempted to conclude that the promises we trusted were empty and the faith we once held was misplaced. And I'd wager that the picture that John draws for us in today's reading may not be a pretty one, but it is a rather realistic one. It is, in other words, a fairly accurate portrait of disbelief, with Jesus surrounded by folks who wanted to believe, who used to believe, who have been trying to believe, but have gone through the motions too long and have finally given up.

But at the same time, John's picture is also one of belief, of courage, and of faith. For as he writes, after many disciples drew back and no longer followed him, Jesus said to the twelve, "Will you also go away?" This is when Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

"You have the words of eternal life." Not all the answers; not just a promise of pie in the sky when we die, but the words of spirit and life are the words of eternal life – life lived knowing the Father and the one whom he sent. It is heartening to realize that even though Peter makes this grand claim, he too denied Jesus when confronted by Jesus' suffering and death, when he turned aside.

Yet, Jesus' resurrection overcame Peter's doubts and inspired his faith. Jesus' resurrection says to us that though we may not understand, though we may turn aside, though we might struggle to follow, God is offering us hope.

Hope in the face of a complex and perplexing world. Hope that might just allow us to say with Peter: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life".

It is indeed a perplexing world. On August 14 the Pennsylvania Supreme Court released its report naming 300 accused priest predators in that state alone who allegedly abused over 1000 victims. According a recent report from the International Rescue Committee, more people have been forced to flee their homes by conflict and crisis than at any time since World War II. In our own country, as of August 24, more than 500 migrant children are still separated from their parents. The violence of the war in the Middle East is horrific, with no end in sight.

As distant as we might feel from such inhumanity of war and suffering, our knowledge of these events and the complex issues that lie behind them can be debilitating. And so confronted by these issues, we ask: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Each one of us here has issues that perplex us and confront us as we struggle to make sense of our world. Some of us are unwell, some are beset by loneliness, some feel sad or are a long way from home, many of us wonder what the future will bring. We all have our personal hopes and fears and dreams and nightmares. The complexity of our lives can weigh heavily upon us.

So whether it is the global issues, the moral issues of our time, or even our personal struggles that swamp us, the message of our faith is spirit and life. We may not know all the answers, but we can stand with Peter and say, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Life has so much more to it than risk. Life lived in solidarity with the poor, the sick, the oppressed is neither unrelievedly grim nor entirely self-denying. There is suffering and pain, to be sure, but there is also joy and freedom in standing with those whom in the Beatitudes Jesus calls “blessed”. The folks who gave up following Jesus did so because they thought they didn’t need him. The ones who stayed knew themselves to have more in common with the strugglers and sufferers than they did with those who

appeared to have it made. They knew their need of God. They could say, with President Carter, "I'm perfectly at ease with whatever comes".

Jesus is the bread of life. Some people think they don't need him. Others know they can't live without him. Our need for God and Jesus is for some a hard teaching and difficult to accept. But for others it's the words of eternal life. I will go to my grave mystified that some people don't seem to need Jesus while others can't seem to live without him. But I know which group I belong to, and I invite you to be part of those who come to the banquet of life and hope and justice in the eternal life in Christ. Amen.