

Blessed be the Name of God

In our reading just now, John the Evangelist tells us that Jesus knew, he “knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.” John goes on to tell us that “many of [Jesus’] disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

For a goodly number of weeks, we have been reading our way through the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. When we began with this chapter, on July 27, Jesus was beset by a very large crowd and he fed them from a few fish and some bread, provisions provided by a young boy in the crowd. We are told there were thousands on that hillside, all fed and captivated by Jesus. A month later, today, we come to the end of the same chapter and the only ones who remain with Jesus are the twelve, soon to be reduced by one. “...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” So, we may well ask, what happened?

Whatever it was, whatever the cause of disenchantment, it was going on while Jesus was delivering his long sermon about the bread of life. Underneath or alongside this long, repetitive, complicated and absolutely fundamental-to-the-faith exposition about bread and wine, flesh and blood, something was happening that would radically reduce Jesus’ company. For the next little while, I’m going to wonder out loud about what happened.

We can begin with what the text tells us so directly. John says that when many heard what Jesus was saying about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, they were

heard to say, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Difficult, indeed. Difficult enough to dull the senses, in fact! And I, dull senses and all, have been teaching sacramental theology for 35 years!

Difficult! Over a sustained period of time, I have had the experience of other priests at the time of communion. It is not uncommon for parents to bring their children to the communion rail and sometimes, the parents will indicate that the child is not to receive. Typically, I let this go and continue delivering the bread. After the service, I search out the family and begin a conversation about communion, saying that the child is welcome. “But,” the parents will say, “he/she doesn’t understand.” That’s when I have to bite my lip. I have been exploring the teachings of Jesus about this bread and wine business for a very long time, and I can honestly say that “understanding” has yet to find me.

Further, what I don’t ask the parents are questions like these: “Did you teach your child about hygiene before you allowed her to bathe?” “Did you teach your child the intricacies of nutrition before you began feeding her?” And so it might go. But, of course, I don’t ask these cheeky questions but they seem to me apt questions, even if they must go unasked.

The last Sunday we served here serving, that was three weeks ago, a young couple came forward along with their son, whose name I learned later was Luke. They were the last to come to the rail and they had to scrunch together to have room to kneel. I gave Mother the bread and began to give some to the boy when the Father gestured such that I should not give him bread, saying, “He’s too young.” In a quiet voice, I said, “As far as the Church is concerned, he’s welcome.” This seemed to fluster the Father a bit so I said,

“If you feed him at home, we can feed him here.” Father relented and he and his son took communion together.

What Jesus says in John 6, over and over again, is not said so we will “understand” in some mechanistic or scientific way. It is a matter of faithfully grasping what’s at the heart of what Jesus is saying. “I am the Bread of Life.” “I will sustain you.” “You can depend on me.” “Feeding on me” will be your way of participating in my life and ministry. As if food, as if bread and wine, Jesus sustains us, nourishes us, gathers us into his Body. That, I take it, is why you all come here to receive communion, sustained, to be nourished, to be fed. “The Body of Christ. The Bread of Heaven.” “The Blood of Christ. The Cup of Salvation.”

I can easily imagine some in that circle around Jesus, some who had been on the hillside with the 5000, I can imagine that when Jesus spoke of himself as the “bread from heaven,” it was finally too much for them, and they withdrew. I don’t doubt that at all.

In the earliest life of the Church, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and after the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 c.e., in those early years and centuries, it was dangerous being a Christian. The physical danger of professing Christ was palpable, a persistent prospect for centuries, really until the early part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It was then that Christianity’s popularity began among the general population and by the end of that century, we really didn’t have a choice. It was either Christianity or exile or death. We can explore all that some other time. But for the moment, beyond the fact of the prospect of physical harm, why might those disciples have turned away?

“This is going to be hard,” they may well have thought. “This might get dangerous. Sticking with Jesus looks like more than I bargained for. This might require

that I change. This might take me where I don't want to go. The people he's attracting, I'm not sure these are my kind of people." I suspect you can hear them murmuring, can't you?

I imagine the exodus began with the revision of the Book of Common Prayer. Although the Prayer Book had been revised a number of times, both in England and in this country, and had been translated into countless other languages besides English, some of Jesus' disciples fastened on the revision of 1928 as the most authentic and enduring edition, one that ought to stand for eternity. When the 1928 edition was challenged and then supplanted, some of these disciples turned away, imagining a shallow unfaithfulness had entered into the faith as they had received it. They seem to have taken the 1928 edition of the Prayer Book to possess the timelessness that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews attributed to Jesus, "the same yesterday, today and tomorrow." [Hebrews 13.8] Some turned away, not realizing that if our forms of prayer were to continue to serve us as vehicles of praise and supplication, they would need to change so as to stay alive. Some turned away.

Others turned their backs when the place and role of women began to change. They seemed to have been content with the implications of the accounting that Matthew the Evangelist used when reporting the crowd so graciously fed by Jesus, "about 5000 men, besides women and children." [Mt 14.21] The women, like the children, did not count in this rendition of the story.

Then the time came when the Church and its male leadership began to awaken to the deeper implications of Jesus' calling and generosity. So, in 1976 on All Saints' Day, the Church ordained the first women to the priesthood. The inclusion that so

characterized the circle around Jesus, finally came to proper long awaited expression. And beyond that, the Church began to ordain women as bishops, of which in the Anglican world there are 24 in current service.

This action, the ordination of women, the ordination of those who, as it were, did not count, this activity caused some to turn away. They were willing to follow in the path of Christ so long as their companions were appropriate and so long as those leading the pilgrimage were the ones who had always led. So, they turned away.

And then of course, more recently, some have turned away because the lax practices that “allowed” women into the circle of leadership, even those lax practices were abandoned in favor of “permitting” or “allowing” gay and lesbian people to take a place of leadership.

“Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So, Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’” That is surely the question that Jesus puts to us as well. We are, after all, still here. “Do you also wish to go away?” What would you say?

When Peter was asked this he said, “Lord, to whom can we go?” I think I would say the same thing. I would go this far with Peter. I have been led here over countless years, nourished by this bread and wine along the way. I cannot conceive another place to be, either spiritually and geographically, for that matter. I believe, with Peter, that Jesus is the Holy One of God. I do not wish to go away. That’s my answer. What’s yours?

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