

August 18, 2024
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 6:51-58

Jesus said to the crowds: I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Background:

Four weeks ago, the Gospel text was the feeding of the 5,000, John 6:1-13. That experience was the starting point of Jesus' instruction which developed the bread of life theme. Last week's text ended with Jesus telling the crowd that he himself is the living bread that comes down from heaven. That verse is repeated as the first verse of today's gospel. Next week the gospel text will be the last verses of this 6th Chapter of John's gospel, when some of the disciples will tell Jesus to his face that this teaching is just too hard to accept, and they will no longer count themselves among his disciples. The attention John has taken to unfold Jesus' teaching on the bread of life, and the fact that John himself tells us that some departed because they could not accept this teaching, should indicate how important and difficult this was for the early disciples. The text invited serious reflection for the early disciples and for us.

In the opening verse here, Jesus identifies himself as the bread from heaven. In the next verse he states that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has life eternal. Jesus states four times that his flesh and blood are to be consumed, and that they give eternal life. Flesh and blood on a literal level represent the human person. When applied to the person of Jesus, it emphasizes the incarnation, that Jesus was a real person. He is also flesh and blood that is sacrificed on the cross. Lastly, as all sacrifices are offered to God and then shared in a meal where those who partake in the meal are sharing that meal with God, Jesus as the body and blood of the sacrifice invites those who participate to share in the heavenly banquet.

While Jesus is inviting the disciples to a deeper understanding, the disciples would be struggling with their cultural and religious heritage that make this understanding difficult. The fact that the Jews quarreled among themselves at this statement should not be a surprise. The word that Jesus used that is translated "eats" here would carry a sense of gnawing, as a dog with a bone. Drinking blood was prohibited within the Jewish community and perhaps among the early Christians. It is not surprising that some of the Jews who were hearing this questioned his teaching. A question in John's gospel usually presents the opportunity for Jesus to further explain his teaching.

For John's community, Jesus is their food and drink. John's gospel is the last of the four gospels to be written, and it benefits from Christians reflecting on the significance of the Jewish traditions and Jesus' life and teaching. The experience of God feeding the Jews in the desert is a springboard to help them understand God's new revelation in Jesus. It is not enough to just believe in Jesus, or his teaching. They were seeking to understand that they too participate in a relationship with God who desires to nourish them on their journey.

Reflection Questions:

1. What images come to mind when you think of flesh?

2. What images come to mind when you think of blood?
3. Have you ever had periods when you did not get enough to eat?
4. Have there been times in your life when you felt a hunger or a thirst that was not about food or drink?
5. What are the things that nourish your soul, and your spirit?
6. How might your experience of this gospel text be different from those who live in places where the priest is only present to say Mass three or four times a year?
7. Do you experience yourself as “being what you eat?” What is the difference for you believing Christ is in the Eucharist and being nourished by Christ’s presence?
8. What do you think Jesus is trying to reveal to you about God’s relationship to you? How would you like to respond?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclom.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for August 18, 2024, the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns;
she has dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table.
She has sent out her maidens; she calls from the heights out over the city:
"Let whoever is simple turn in here; to the one who lacks understanding," she says,
"Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!
Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding."

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord; the lowly will hear me and be glad.
Glorify the Lord with me, let us together extol his name.
I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame.
When the poor one called out, the Lord heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

Brothers and sisters: Watch carefully how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise,
making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil.
Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord.
And do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing

one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Jesus said to the crowds: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.

For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Excerpts from Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:2-7; Ephesians 5:15-20; and John 6:51-58

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for August 18th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the gospel from John, Jesus' discourse about the Bread of Life continues from where it left off last week. The verse is repeated where Jesus tells the crowd, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." Jesus adds, "My flesh is true food, my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him; and he has eternal life--I will raise him on the last day. Unless you eat this flesh and drink this blood, you do not have life within you."

The other readings have references to wisdom and comparisons where seeking understanding is like coming to where there is food and drink, and that there is life in it, and that thanks is to be given there for what the Lord provides. In the first reading from Proverbs, Wisdom is extolled for inviting the ones who seek understanding to her banquet: "She has spread her table. She calls, 'Advance in the way of understanding; turn in here. Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine! Forsake foolishness that you may live!'" Psalm 34 resounds, "Taste and see how good the Lord is. Let my soul glory in the Lord--let us together extol the Lord's name. The Lord heard the one who called out, and from his distress he saved him." In the second reading, from the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "Live not as foolish persons but as wise, making the most of the opportunity; try to understand what is the will of the Lord. Do not get drunk on wine, but be filled with the Spirit, giving thanks always in the name of Jesus Christ to God the Father."

If not for the understanding we develop through the grace of God and repeated participation in the Eucharist, we too, like the crowd, would find ourselves asking, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" There is a sense of urgency about the need to understand—lest we die! Jesus repeats the teaching several times, for emphasis. Wisdom says, "Forsake foolishness that you may live." The psalmist sings, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me." Paul writes, "Do not continue in ignorance." Jesus adds, "Just as I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This bread that came down from heaven is unlike the manna your ancestors ate and still died." Understanding, or not, it is whoever eats this bread, this flesh, and believes, that will live forever.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!