

An Invitation to Eternal Food and Drink.

Since the last Sunday in July, and with the exception of the Feast of the Transfiguration, our Sunday readings have all been taken from the sixth chapter of the *Gospel of John*. This will conclude with next Sunday's Gospel, but the message of *John 6* really comes to its climax this Sunday. The verse following today's Gospel notes this as Jesus's conclusion to his teaching at the Synagogue in Capernaum.

I would like to provide a brief look at this fundamental section of the New Testament.

The sixth chapter of *John* takes place as the Jewish Feast of Passover is about to begin. The Passover celebration had evolved from a combination of two Jewish celebrations: the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt and the celebration of the barley harvest known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The slaying of the Passover lamb recalled God's actions protecting the Israelites in Egypt and the Feast of Unleavened Bread recalled God nourishing the people in the desert with manna.

During the Exodus, the people received both manna and the law. As time progressed, the two concepts, the gift of manna and the gift of the law, became interchangeable demonstrations of God's preference for his people.

In the days of the Exodus, the manna which was not eaten within a few days had to be thrown away, it was no longer any good. In the beginning of the sixth chapter of *John*, Jesus multiplies bread, but the twelve baskets of fragments left over are to be saved. Jesus provides a bread which is forever. When after the multiplication of loaves, Jesus walks on water, it is clear to his disciples that he has come from God. When Jesus says that God has set his seal upon his Son, the disciples realize that Jesus' works are the works of God.

Jesus now teaches the people that the manna and the law, terms that he uses interchangeably, were finite and for a specific people. He speaks about a new bread come down from heaven that is eternal and for all people. No longer will Moses, that is the Law, or Manna, or Wisdom or the Torah provide sufficient nourishment. Jesus, the Bread of Life will satisfy the deepest needs of humankind. He promises eternal life to those who perfect their adherence to the Law by believing in the Son sent by the Father. Moses once pointed to the Manna and said, "This is the bread the Lord has given you for your food." Jesus points to himself and says, "I am the bread of life. The bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Those who challenge Jesus and oppose Christianity in the *Gospel of John*, referred to as the Jews, appear in the beginning of today's gospel unable to transcend the physical and enter into the spiritual. Jesus is going to provide that which is physical as a means of entering into the spiritual. He uses violent terms, flesh and blood. When Jesus says that his flesh is food and his blood is drink, he is saying that his physical death will provide the eternal, spiritual food and drink.

Jesus doesn't just speak about people believing in him. He uses the expression, the one who eats my flesh and drinks by blood. He uses Eucharistic terms, terms the ancient Christians were familiar with from their celebrations of the Eucharist and terms that we are familiar with from our Masses: "bread," "food," "flesh," "blood," "to eat," "to drink," "will give," "for your sakes." Jesus, the true bread from heaven will replace the former bread from heaven, the manna and law, with his broken body and spilled blood. The concrete place where the believer encounters the true bread from heaven is in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the action where the believer shares the redemptive mystery of the Cross.

When we receive communion, we receive Jesus' sacrificed body and blood. When we receive communion we enter into the mystical. In fact, the earliest word to explain the action of the Eucharist was the *mysterium*, the mystery, the mystical.

I get so upset when I hear people reducing this sacrament to a meal of fellowship. I get upset when I hear people simplifying this mystery into a reception of blessed bread. The bread is not just blessed. It is Jesus. And it is not just Jesus walking, or teaching, or even in union with his Father. The Eucharist is Jesus dying for us, sacrificing himself for us, and calling us to perform the same sacrifice for others.

The Eucharist is infinitely greater than the manna that fell from the sky during the Exodus. The Eucharist is the eternal sacrifice of Jesus providing life to those who eat his body and drink his blood.

Our tri-annual reflections on the sixth chapter of John are meant for us to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the gift that we routinely receive every time we come to communion. When we come to Church, we need to prepare to receive communion. We need to reflect on what we are doing and Whom we are receiving. We also need to consider what is being done for us. The eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ enters our being and flows through our veins giving us all we need to sustain and nourish our union with God.