



WEEK 2: JOHN 6

Scripture: John 6

Instructions: On the first day you pray with this guide, use the whole chapter for your prayer time. Then, highlight the sections, verses, or even phrases that strike you and spend subsequent days going more in-depth into those passages: why is God calling you to focus your attention there? Let these words sit with you even after your prayer time, and let God continue to speak to you through them throughout your day.

Reflection from Archbishop Aquila:

You can watch Archbishop's video reflections at archden.org/easter2021

This week I am asking you to spend time praying with John 6. This chapter houses an account of the feeding of the 5,000 and, famously, the Bread of Life discourse, one of the most foundational Scriptural teachings by Jesus for the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. This chapter's continued Eucharistic emphasis will allow our reflection this week to build on our encounter at Emmaus last week. My prayer for you is that these two weeks help all of us to grow in our love of the Mass and will also encourage us to begin praying for those who have not yet been able to (or sadly have chosen not to) return to the Sunday liturgy.

I want to begin by making a theological point about John 6, how it is a clear support for our Catholic understanding of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Following that more intellectual point, however, I want to zero in on Peter's response to Jesus in what is one of the great examples of discipleship captured in the Bible.

One of the most potent parts of this chapter is Jesus' clarity that he is speaking not, as some of our separated Christian brethren argue, in symbolic terminology, but is truly referring to his anticipated Eucharistic presence in the Church. Reading the Bread of Life discourse, beginning in verse twenty-two, what stands out to me is Christ's

persistence that they understand him fully.

“Amen, amen,” indeed, truly, he says to them, “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” (v. 55-56). You may have heard that, although the original Greek originally uses a more general or broad verb, *phago*, for eat in v. 48-53 -- which could have taken on more potentially symbolic meanings -- from v. 54 on, Jesus uses the more visceral *trogo*, an unmistakable verb, which could just be as easily translated as “chew” or “munch,” that can only point to the actual act of eating food. Our God wants to be clear of his desire to truly become food for us.

The story provides more evidence of the literal, non-symbolic nature of Jesus’ teaching in the crowd’s reaction to this teaching: they leave. If they knew Jesus was speaking metaphorically, why go? Furthermore, Jesus does not correct them, but lets them go as they understand that Jesus is teaching about his real presence in the Bread of Life.

Remember, Jesus is at the height of his public ministry here. He just fed a group that numbered 5,000 *men*, not even counting the women and children. Think of a crowd that could fill the Pepsi Center here in Denver; that is how many people listened to him deliver this speech. And as the realization of what he is asking sinks in, we read in verse 66, “as a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” At this point, if he were speaking symbolically or metaphorically, he would simply clear things up. His refusal to water down the teaching to try to make it more palatable or relevant, or backtrack by saying that he was speaking metaphorically, should be telling for us.

What a profound gift we have as a Church in the mystery of Christ’s Eucharistic presence with us. The Eucharist is a clear example of God’s desire to have a close and intimate relationship with us. His love reaching out in this way should make us desire to draw close to him.

Now, I want to turn to Peter’s powerful response to Jesus telling them for the first time about this profound mystery of the Real Presence. First, note in the above passage, that it is even some of Jesus’ *disciples* who leave. Not all of these persons who walk away had just heard about Jesus the day before when he fed them. Some had been following him for a while, but this teaching’s strangeness and difficulty proved to be a step too far; they struggle to fully accept this teaching and do not follow him anymore. This can happen in the faith journey of some; it can be one or two doctrines of the Church that turns into an experience of doubt and, while walking through seasons of doubt is something that most believers go through, it can sadly also lead to a decision to leave the faith.

After the crowd goes away, Jesus turns to his apostles, the Twelve, and gives them

the freedom to do so as well, turning to those who are his closest friends, he asks, “Do you also want to leave?” (v. 67) Faithfulness, even in the face of apparent difficulty or confusion, must be freely chosen.

In one of the great declarations in all of Scripture, though, Peter replies on behalf of the Twelve, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.” (v. 68) Coming from a man we know does not always get it right, this is an incredible display of faith that shows us the heart of true discipleship.

Peter’s declaration is one of the best Biblical examples of what it means to follow Jesus as a disciple. He is certainly not saying, “I understand everything you are telling us perfectly. This all makes sense. I get what you are doing here, Lord.” What he is saying is that he knows Jesus to be trustworthy. Even in the face of confusion, he will follow and believe.

What God asks of us sometimes, amid tremendous uncertainty, struggle, doubt, or suffering, is to simply cling to him. To remain. To not go anywhere. To be able to say, like Peter did, “This might not make sense right now, but I know you are who you say you are, and so I will stay.”

The decision to follow Jesus is not one we make only once in our lives but repeatedly. To choose to echo Peter’s words in every season of life is the heart of our calling as disciples. Many of the moral decisions we know God calls us to require incredible trust and even heroism. We meet the demands of the Gospel not by our will power but our deep trust in Jesus Christ and the grace he provides us in the Holy Spirit.

A final note: notice how often in this chapter Jesus mentions the Father. Ten separate times, Jesus references his Father and the Father’s plan, revealing the extent to which Jesus understands his ministry as obedience to the Father. His obedience is one that is rooted in love, trusting his Father and the good the Father desires for him and for our salvation.

This theme will come up many more times as we turn to Jesus’ discourses at the Last Supper in John 14-17, that Jesus is, himself, sent by the Father to bring us to him. It is the Father’s desire to bring us life and to be in an intimate relationship with all his children that drives all of Jesus’ efforts. Our hearts yearn for our identity that comes from knowing deeply that we are a beloved daughter or son of the Father, through our Baptism and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our relationship with the Father and Jesus is most especially nourished in the Eucharist as we offer our lives, in love, to the Father in, with, and through Jesus.

May God bless you abundantly during this second week of the celebration of Easter.