

Do You Also Want to Leave?

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The question Jesus asks of His disciples, resonates with us down the centuries to the present day. With the current crisis in the Church and the news that seems to deepen that crisis on a daily basis, those whose faith is shallow have already left and returned to their former way of life. And now Jesus turns to us and asks, “do you also want to leave?”

For the past five weeks or so we have focused our Gospel reading on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. It is called the bread of life discourse. And because we have broken it up and extended it over the month it is easy to lose track of the context of these readings.

So let's review.

A large crowd surrounds Our Lord in the synagogue of Capernaum. Many of them were present only one day before, when Jesus fed thousands with just a few loaves of bread. But now He tells them how He will become divine food for them, nourishing them, that is to say, nourishing us, with His divine life.

Many of our Protestant brothers and sisters will claim that Jesus was speaking symbolically, that he didn't mean we were to actually eat His flesh, and drink His blood. They will say Catholics take the words of Jesus far too literally and refer to the Eucharist in derogatory terms such as cookie, or wafer, or cracker.

But Jesus was very careful and very explicit in the terms He used. The word we translate as “eat” comes from the Greek word, “trogo.” Trogo means

to gnaw or chew, to crunch. Jesus truly gives us His body and blood to eat, under the appearance of bread and wine so that we may have eternal life.

And the reaction from His listeners? They turn their backs on Him. Only one day before, they witnessed a miracle, but now, God's creatures turn their backs on their Creator. How painful that must have been for Jesus. Because He is fully human as well as fully divine, Jesus feels every emotion that we feel, including sorrow and disappointment. When His people turn away from Him and fall into sin and error, Jesus feels the same sorrow, disillusionment, and disappointment that we feel when people we have put our trust in, betray us.

Jesus then turns to His closest disciples, the Twelve that He has chosen to become the foundation of His Church. He doesn't try to soften His words, or reinterpret them, He simply asks, "do you also want to leave?"

This was a moment of crisis, the faith of the Twelve is challenged. Being challenged by our faith is nothing new. The challenge is, do we put our faith in our own understanding or do we put our faith in God? Jesus is asking the Twelve closest to Him, where will they put their trust, whom will they serve?

This is the question that we have been presented with from the beginning,, from Adam and Eve in the garden, to Joshua and the Israelites, down to our present day, whom will you serve? In whom will you put your faith, in God or in yourselves?

When we study the history of man's relationship with God, we see a pattern, a cycle that is repeated over and over again. We begin with God, as we did at the beginning of all things, united to Him in flesh and spirit. But then we turn away from God. We lean more on our own understanding rather than God's will for us, and we fall into sin. This exposes us to more sin and we fall further and further away.

Then, when we have fallen as far as we possibly can, God sends a prophet or a leader to bring us back.

But, even at our lowest point, when we have turned our backs on God and run as far away from Him as we possibly can, there is still left a remnant of the faithful, a few believers who were left behind.

The meaning of the phrase, "left behind," has been somewhat twisted in recent years. Through a series of books and movies the popular idea is that at some point the righteous will be swept up into Heaven and the wicked and sinful will be left behind. But that is not at all how first century Jews would have understood the phrase.

Only a few hundred years before Jesus, the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem. The King of the Jewish people at the time was Zedekiah. Zedekiah and his people were vassals to Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. When Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian reaction was swift and merciless. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple of Solomon was razed to the ground. To the Jewish people this was seen as divine punishment because the people had turned their backs on God. The worst offenders against God were killed outright, and the majority of the people were "taken up" into exile in Babylon.

But a small number of people, a remnant, those who remained faithful to God were left behind. It was this remnant that safeguarded the faith. When the descendants of the exiles returned to Jerusalem, it was this remnant that brought them back to God.

This is the cycle of our relationship with God. We begin with God, we fall away, and from the remnant of the faithful, God rebuilds. He sends us an Abraham or a Moses or a Joshua or a David, to rebuild and lead us back to Him.

Unfortunately, once we are reconciled with God, we fall away again far too easily. All too often when people meet a challenge to their faith that they cannot understand, they simply abandon that faith.

Our faith is very rich and at times, can be very complex. Sometimes we encounter mysteries that cannot be explained. Why does God allow His Church to be compromised by the Adversary? How can we trust the shepherds that have misled their flocks, and how do we remain faithful to the ones who have remained true to their calling? Sometimes we are called to the nearly blind faith that Peter demonstrated for us today. It is unlikely that he understood Christ's Eucharistic teaching better than anyone else, but his faith allowed him to answer, "We have come to believe and are convinced, that you are the Holy One of God."

The Twelve remained because they placed their faith in the person of Jesus, not in their own limited ability to understand God.

By exercising our faith in the midst of a crisis, by not depending on our own, limited, error-prone understanding, we lift our spiritual maturity to a new level.

Saint Basil the Great told us, "As the pilot of a vessel is tried in the storm, as the wrestler is tried in the ring, the soldier in the battle, and the hero in adversity, so is the Christian tried in temptation."

The devil tempts us to leave the Church because it is full of sinners. Well of course it is, for we are all sinners and prone to sin. But it is in the Church that we find healing and are reconciled to God.

Our faith must be strong enough and deep enough to weather any crisis. To borrow a phrase from Tolkien, "deep roots are not reached by the frost."

Our faith is not in the leadership of the Church. Our faith is not in deacons or priests or bishops or cardinals. Our faith is not even in the pope. Our faith is in Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

This current crisis began several years ago, we are simply seeing a new wave of the attack. At the first wave pope Benedict XVI predicted that the Church that survived this time may be smaller, but it will be stronger. It will be stronger because the faith of the remnant has deep roots.

Two thousand years ago Jesus asked a question of those closest to Him, today He asks the same question to those closest to him.

“Will you also leave?”

No Lord, where would I go? You have the words of eternal life. In you I place my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength. In you, I place my faith. As for me and my household, we will serve the lord.