

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

John 6:63c, 68c

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life;
you have the words of everlasting life.

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Gospel

John 6:60-69; L122B

Many of Jesus' disciples who were
listening said,

"This saying is hard; who can
accept it?"

Since Jesus knew that his disciples
were murmuring about this,
he said to them, "Does this shock
you?"

What if you were to see the Son of
Man ascending
to where he was before?

It is the spirit that gives life,
while the flesh is of no avail.

The words I have spoken to you are
Spirit and life.

But there are some of you who do not
believe."

Jesus knew from the beginning the
ones who would not believe
and the one who would betray him.

And he said,

"For this reason I have told you that
no one can come to me
unless it is granted him by my
Father."

As a result of this,
many of his disciples returned to
their former way of life
and no longer accompanied him.

Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you
also want to leave?"

Simon Peter answered him, "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."

Reflecting on the Gospel

Today is the fifth and final Sunday of our reading from John 6, the second longest chapter in the New Testament (Luke 1 is the longest). Even so, we do not read the entire sixth chapter of John. We skipped Jesus' walking on water (John 6:16-21)! The church gives us five Sundays with this chapter precisely because of its profound eucharistic theology. What began with the multiplication of the loaves ends the following day with nearly all of his disciples abandoning him and returning to their former way of life precisely because of this "hard" saying, the consumption of Jesus' very flesh and blood.



Jesus then asks the Twelve if they too will leave. We have the impression that if they had chosen to leave, Jesus would simply have started anew. He was not going to change his teaching to attract the crowds. Instead, he would teach what he knew to be true, for his words were Spirit and life. Jesus knows that nobody can come to him, can believe in him, unless it is granted by the Father. In our words, we say faith is a gift. We cannot come to Jesus unless we are given the gift of faith. Only if that special gift is granted by the Father will one believe. All the arguments, discussions, proofs, demonstrations, blog posts, and talks cannot guarantee faith. It is a gift given not by us, but by God the Father.

How do the Twelve respond when Jesus asks whether they too might leave? Simon Peter answers with a question of his own: "to whom shall we go? / You have the words of eternal life . . . you are the Holy One of God." Thus we have in John's gospel Peter's "confession" that comes as the culmination of this profound chapter in which we have the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus' walking on water, and the bread of life discourse. After witnessing such deeds and speech Simon Peter speaks for all disciples, "to whom shall we go?" Jesus' words are everlasting life. To leave Jesus is in many senses to leave life itself. For Simon Peter, then, there is no other place or person to whom he might go. He is not returning to his former way of life. He has been introduced to something more, eternal life from the Word of God come down from heaven. For the one who has faith, in the face of such a revelation there is no other choice.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Peter's response can be our own when faced with the overwhelming mystery of the gift of faith in the one sent from God. Yet, we should be humble with respect to this mystery, for the gift is not given to all, but only to those whom the Father grants it. In light of this it is good to be patient with those who do not share our faith. And when another does come to faith we can be assured that it is not because of our wondrous evangelization, our dedication to a particular program, or our having memorized specific Scripture verses. God grants faith to those to whom he will.

Even Jesus himself allowed many of his disciples (not merely the crowds) to return to their former way of life when his teaching seemed too hard. Our faith is not subject to scientific scrutiny after which a demonstrable proof will be accepted by a rational mind. Instead, faith is a gift.

We can be thankful for this gift of faith that leads to eternal life. We can share it with others. But ultimately it is God the Father who is the giver. Once granted this gift, we, like the disciples, have nowhere to turn but to Jesus. In light of his challenging teachings, the response of Peter is our own. "Master, to whom shall we go? / You have the words of eternal life."

Focusing the Gospel

John 6:60-69

Today's concluding section of the bread of life discourse from John's gospel is a turning point for Jesus' disciples. Will they join the ranks of the skeptics, who cannot fathom Jesus and his talk of "eating his flesh," or will they commit themselves to Jesus—and the shadows of the cross that are beginning to fall? Jesus' question is direct and to the point: "Do you also want to leave?" Peter's simple, plaintive answer is the confession of faith voiced by disciples of every age who have come to taste the Word of God made flesh. They have come to believe that he has the words of eternal life.

Focusing the First Reading

Josh 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Joshua, the commander of Israel's military forces, succeeded Moses as leader of the Israelites. In the conclusion to the book bearing his name, Joshua and the tribes of Israel are at a turning point in their relationship with Yahweh. Their long exodus journey has been completed; the Israelites have fought for and arrived at the land God has given them. At Shechem, Joshua challenges the Israelites to either embrace the gods of the land in which they now dwell or reaffirm their covenant with the God who brought them out of Egyptian captivity to freedom in this new place. The people elect to renew their covenant with God. Like Peter and the disciples in today's gospel, Joshua and the new nation of Israel are called to embrace the word of the God of justice and redemption.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21 (9a)

On this Sunday that concludes our reading of Jesus' bread of life discourse in chapter 6 of John's gospel, the final verses of Psalm 34 are sung, a hymn of thanksgiving to the God of mercy who protects the poor and brokenhearted.

Focusing the Second Reading

Eph 5:21-32

Throughout Scripture, prophets and sages often employ the images of marriage and betrothal to portray God's loving relationship with his people. Paul writes in that tradition in today's reading from Ephesians. Though Paul's language may sound dated and sexist to contemporary ears, if read in the context of Paul's time two thousand years ago, the apostle beautifully equates the relationship between husband and wife as it was understood in antiquity to that of Christ and his church. In modernity we would say that obedience and subordination are required of both husband and wife: spouses give to each other completely, willingly, and unreservedly, just as Jesus the crucified gave himself completely, willingly, and unreservedly for humankind. The love of God is what distinguishes the church from the rest of society; ancient Christian marriage is a model of the sacrificial love of Christ for his church.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

What "sayings" of Jesus do you find especially hard to accept?

When have you experienced "spirit and life" in your struggle to live the Gospel?

In what ordinary and simple ways do families "serve the Lord" in the spirit of Joshua?

In light of Paul's words to husbands and wives in today's second reading, how does married life mirror the relationship of Christ and the church?