

The gospel reading today is a sad one - certainly not one of the best days in the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is a story of people (many of them) who got to the limit of what they were willing to believe from Jesus and decided to walk away. The story is even sadder when we realize that these people were not enemies of Christ - not part of those who plotted against Him. These were people who had followed Him enthusiastically for some time. These people were part of a large crowd that had followed Him for days - those that were taught by Him and fed when He multiplied the loaves and the fishes. They were some of those that had an open discussion and considered whether he could be the Christ - the long-awaited Messiah they longed for. And yet, they left. Even the disciples who stayed seemed perplexed and unsure. Peter's answer to Jesus when He asked, "Do you also want to leave?" seemed tentative. He replied; "Master, to whom shall we go?"

The teaching of Jesus that was so hard for them to accept, of course, was about what we now call the "Eucharist". We've been reading about it in John 6 for several weeks now. Jesus had just told them, emphatically and repeatedly, that HE was THE LIVING BREAD come from heaven - that they must EAT HIS FLESH and DRINK HIS BLOOD as food for their souls that would enable them to LIVE FOREVER - and that if they did not, they would have NO LIFE in them (that was the reading last week).

As Fr. Stanton pointed out last week, we who have grown up with the doctrine of the Eucharist - the Real Presence of Christ given to us in the form of bread and wine - We cannot realize how hard and shocking these words must have been to these first disciples. He seemed to be suggesting the most repulsive and ungodly idea they could imagine. It was "too hard", they said. And they refused to accept it. "How could it be true?". "How could it possibly be done?"

Another entire year would pass before Jesus, at the last Supper, revealed to the apostles just how He intended to supply His flesh and blood to the millions of believers who would seek this "Bread from heaven". They finally understood it when He took the bread and the wine and gave them the words of consecration which have been passed on and have been said at every Mass since then - words and actions which Christ guarantees make the miracle occur - the provision of His Body and Blood for as many and as long as His people desire to receive Him through all time. But, that part of the puzzle, which answered "How" he would do this, would, as I said, be a year later. He did not offer it when the crowds were leaving Him that day in Galilee.

Why ? The answer to that question is a big one. It leads to a very profound discussion about faith - REAL faith.

You see, surveys reveal that the vast majority of people believe in the existence of God. And, most of us are willing to occasionally believe God FOR something - (a rent payment, relief from a backache, a job, etc). That's what the crowds who followed Jesus had. They wanted Him as long as He said things they liked and because He could heal them or provide free food.

But, Jesus did not allow them to stop at the type of faith that simply believes that God is "out there" somewhere or that we turn on and apply only when we have a certain need. He wanted more for them. He wanted faith on the terms that God wants - Faith that is lived full time, all the time, everywhere and "no-matter-what". Faith that our entire life is invested IN - believing God, not for SOME things - but for ALL things!

It is a type of faith that is held NOT because we understand everything to our satisfaction - but because we TRUST the ONE who tells us. On that basis, we can believe whether we understand, according to our logic and reason - or not.

That's the kind of faith Joshua was asking of the Israelites in the 1st reading today when he exhorted them to dare to believe God and, against all odds, enter the Promised Land - to follow him in his decision - "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord".

It is the type of covenant faith that Paul says, in the 2nd reading to the Ephesians, should be imitated by married couples who believe in each other enough to commit to each other for life, no matter what problems comes along.

And Peter, in His answer to Jesus on the day many left, demonstrated THAT kind of faith. He gave the answer Jesus was hoping from all of them - Peter said, "Master, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe that YOU are the HOLY ONE OF GOD". In other words, he said - "We are also challenged here - we don't understand how this can be, either - but we TRUST YOU - and therefore, somehow, we believe because we know you are right. ". That answer must have pleased Jesus very much.

But...WHY? Why does God demand such a challenging and difficult level of faith from us?

The answer is because mature faith like this- the faith that allows us to believe no matter what Jesus says and no matter what the circumstances say otherwise - is the way for us to receive His greatest blessing - to achieve the "abundant life" that He will speak about later in John, chapter 10. In other words, He wants it from us because He wants us to have its many benefits. It's for US.

Faith like this becomes a way we can "know" things that are far beyond our natural capabilities to discover. supernatural things - things of God - things of eternal wisdom and everlasting Truth - things we "KNOW" because we completely trust the God who has revealed them to us.

This is the path to a blessed transformation in what we are and how we live. It is how we mature as Christians. It is how we gradually take on the mind of Christ and realize our fullest baptismal potential. It allows a transition, in time, from confusion to clarity... from constant upheaval and mood swings to stability and satisfaction... from inner turmoil to inner peace.

This is the way we move from greed and selfishness to generosity....from self-condemnation and shame to self-forgiveness and personal dignity...from anger and violence to being a peace-lover and a peace-maker.

This is the way we grow, in time, to be able to control our mouths and thoughts and impulses for good, rather than do evil with them. It is how we get free of the slavery to grudges and bitterness and hatred for those who've hurt us to the freedom of forgiveness.

This is the way we learn to persevere in difficult times, to make morally good decisions and to operate with courageous love, free of the vanity of lesser loves like money and frivolity and control and lusts of all kind.

These virtues, and many more, are wonderful, glorious benefits not attainable by natural mankind - but only, over time, by the children of God who are enlivened and inspired by His grace to live a life of mature faith in Him.

That's not an easy thing to do. There is great struggle involved - what St. Paul calls "the good fight of faith" (I Tim 6:12). Fear, doubt, confusion, the cares of the world and life's disappointments rise up to oppose us all and try to rob us of our faith by tempting us to concentrate on temporary CIRCUMSTANCES rather than on the eternal TRUTH - tempting us to live again for THINGS rather than for Him. Distracting us from loving Him more than ANYTHING else and from believing in His promises more than how things seem to be to the human eye.

The victory comes in stirring up our faith again (again and again) in these times and deciding, despite the circumstances, NOT to be caught up in the pursuit of THINGS - of worrying about THINGS - but to trust God. It doesn't depend on how things seem or how we feel. When we fail, which we all do....we must get up again as quickly as we can and as often as we must - just as Jesus got up again and again when He carried His cross to Calvary. This is part of carrying our own cross. He is our model and strength. His strong shoulder is the one we lean on when for help.

Worry and anxiety and anguish grow in times of unbelief. It is toxic for the soul, so don't stay in that state long. Joy and peace are His gifts to us and these are found in believing. We must fight like warriors to not let them be stolen from us by evil or spiritual laziness. "Fight the good fight" in good times and in bad. Never give up.... and NEVER be one of those that walk away.