

## **HOMILY for 21<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year B**

This Sunday's Gospel discusses with us on the challenging teaching of Jesus that might have caused some of His disciples to leave Him. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

A Sunday school teacher was using the squirrel as an object lesson on being prepared for her class. "I'm going to describe something," she told the class, "and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is." The children waited eagerly.

"This thing lives in trees [pause] & eats nuts [pause]." No hands went up.

"It's gray [pause] & has a long bushy tail [pause]." The children looked at each other, but nobody raised a hand.

"And it jumps from branch to branch [pause] & chatters & flips its tail when it's excited [pause]."

Finally one boy tentatively raised his hand. "Well," he said, "I know the answer must be Jesus... it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!"

Anyway, in the last few Sundays, we have heard how Jesus called on the world to take care of its spiritual needs & revealed Himself to be the living bread come down from Heaven. Unless it eats His flesh & drinks His blood, it will not have life & access to eternal life in the end. Now we might take for granted the ease of discussing Holy Communion as the real body & blood of Jesus. But, the people back then struggled to understand Jesus' new idea of the living bread from Heaven. Some of His family & hometown folks thought that Jesus might have lost His mind by talking about that. The rest of His audience, including some of His followers walked away & stopped listening to Him anymore.

That's why we've learned in today's Gospel about the following reaction of His followers, "Many of the disciples of Jesus remarked, 'This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?' ...From this time on, many of His disciples broke away & would not remain in His company any longer." That is how foreign & controversial the idea of Jesus being the living bread was. It would have taken a bit longer for His disciples & the world to finally realize what Jesus was talking about.

The closest example of consuming human flesh & blood for people back then was the Roman sacrifice to a god. Evidently the Romans would slaughter animals, drink their blood, & burn their flesh to make their sacrificial offering. Sometimes people might have heard about human sacrifice as a worship ritual. But, the idea of cannibalism was something strange & foreign to the people back then. In fact, it was reported that only one ancient tribe living on a Pacific island practiced that grotesque idea when its members killed a missionary & cannibalized him. When I ran away from the Communist regime in Viet Nam, I have heard about cannibalism as the living had to eat the dead in order to stay alive. But, the idea did not sink in until I was floating in a dinky boat with over a hundred passengers as its captain tried to prepare everyone for the worst case scenario. He told us that we might be lost at sea for weeks without any food & drink left. Some of us might die; & the remaining folks would have to cannibalize the dead in order to survive. Being a teenager, I was totally grossed out by that idea & did not know if I would be able to go through with it. That is why I'm not surprised to hear about the reaction of the public & some of the disciples of Jesus in today's Gospel. They did not only think cannibalism was weird but also find it very difficult to practice.

Facing the resistance of the public & His disciples to the new idea & their abandonment, Jesus asked His remaining twelve disciples in today's Gospel, "Do you want to leave me too?" Simon Peter spoke for them & answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

We have come to believe; we are convinced that you are God's holy one." We might not be challenged with the new idea like the people back then did with the living bread from Heaven. But, we all have had to face many challenges in our daily life such as health, relationship, work, school, basic necessities, tragedies, & so on. When one of those unfortunate things happens to us, we often turn away from God & struggle to maintain a good spiritual life. Our faith is shaken as we wonder if God has abandoned us. Those difficult moments have been referred to as the dark nights of the soul. Some folks cannot maintain their relationship with God after those tragedies & have fallen away from their faith. That is why the biggest Church denomination nowadays is not Protestant or Atheist. Rather, it belongs to the fallen-away Catholics. Unfortunately, these folks no longer practice their Catholic faith for one reason or another.

This Sunday Jesus realizes all the temptations & challenges that His followers have to face in a secular, materialistic world & hence comes to us with the same question, "Do you want to leave me too?" We've heard how Peter & the early disciples answered it. I hope you'll find your own answer & let Jesus know how you feel about your relationship with Him. Meanwhile, Joshua shared with us his answer in today's First Reading as following, "If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling. As for me & my household, we will serve the Lord." Speaking for myself, I've encountered so many life challenges since my childhood, from the Viet Nam War & the Communist regime to the terrible losses of family members & dear friends due to tragedies. Those life challenges have tested my faith & made me wonder if God still cares about me. Of course, the dirty Church politics has not been quite helpful to those dark nights of my soul. Truthfully, there have been times that I have wanted to throw in the towel & walk away from my Catholic faith & priesthood. But, the Scriptural passage that I chose for the Prayer Card of my Priesthood Ordination has given me encouragement & renewed my faith & life mission. It reads, "...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? Yet in all this, we are more than conquerors because of Him who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creatures will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord," So, in spite of all the challenges that might make me question my faith in Jesus & attempt to sever my relationship with Him, St. Paul reminds me that Christ's love for me will never change. In those doubtful moments, I just need to look up to the Cross of Jesus & remind myself of His unwavering love for me. That is why I remain a Catholic & continue to be a priest to the end.

My dear brothers & sisters, some of Jesus' teachings such as loving our enemies might be difficult for us to practice. Church politics might drive us crazy at times. Our life challenges might test our faith & discourage us from following Jesus. In those dark nights of our soul, hopefully we can come up with an answer like Peter did & say, "Lord, to whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life. I have come to believe; I'm convinced that you are God's holy one."