

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118:4 (2012) 354-375 by Raymond F. Collins.

Some years ago Washington’s James Cardinal Hickey shared with me that during vacation he liked to attend Sunday Mass in a church where he was not known and listen to the homily. Spending some of the time in Florida this past winter that my senior status and semi-retirement allows gave me the opportunity to have a similar experience, to sit in the pew and listen. This experience has prompted me to reflect some more on the nature of the homily.

I will continue to comment on the homily in my next contribution to “Breaking the Word.” In the meantime, I recall a remark made by one leading member of a parish to a group of parishioners. Supported by the parish priests, the parish-leader observed that the homily should make the congregation feel good.

But is making people feel good the real purpose of a homily? Is that what a homily is all about? Is God’s word intended to make us feel good? If so, the homily can easily lead to self-righteousness and a judgmental attitude towards others. We are the ones to whom Jesus’ promises and consoling words are directed; God’s challenging and sometimes condemnatory words are meant for others. We are not like them, those “other people” of Luke 18:11.

Truth to tell, God’s words are often challenging. Sometimes they make us feel uncomfortable, as some of Jesus’ home-town folks (cf. Mark 6:1-6a, the gospel lection for July 8) and many of Jesus’ disciples (John 6:60-68, the lection for August 26) discovered.

Rather than being intended to make us feel good, the purpose of the homily is to actualize the word of God, to allow God’s word to be relevant to our present day and circumstances. In this regard, the words of a recent biblical study are pertinent: “For the New Testament authors as well as for the authors of these Jewish writings, ‘Scripture’ was not simply a text coming from a distant past. The *Tanach*, the three-part collection of Jewish Scriptures consisting of the Torah, the Prophets, and the ‘Writing,’ was received as God’s word for the present.” (*The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012], 49). Homilies stand within this biblical tradition.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 5, 2012

LITURGY

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 describes God’s gift of manna and quail to the Israelites at the time of the Exodus in response to their grumbling because they were hungry.

Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 speaks of conversion and personal renewal.

John 6:24-35 introduces the homiletic midrash on Ps 78:24, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat,” a scriptural verse that is taken up in John 6:31. Although the tradition history of the midrash, which we know as the Johannine Discourse on the Bread of Life, is complicated, this need not overly concern us. As a whole and as it presently appears, the discourse is quite meaningful.

Today’s passage is built around three remarks that the crowd addresses to Jesus, “Rabbi, when did you get here” (v. 25), “What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do?” (v. 30), and “Sir, give us this bread always” (v. 34). Jesus solemnly responds to each remark. The first two times by prefacing his response with “Amen, amen, I say to you” (vv. 26, 32), the third time with a characteristic *ego eimi* saying, “I am the bread of life” (v. 35).

In the first section of today’s passage (vv. 24-29) Jesus tells the crowd to seek the food that endures for eternal life. The “crowd” (*ho ochlos*) is loosely construed; the word cannot refer

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to the whole crowd of 5000 men who had been fed (John 6:10). As far as their “faith” is concerned, the crowd seems to have regressed. Previously they were said to believe because of Jesus’ signs. They proclaimed Jesus to be the prophet like Moses and were ready to proclaim him their king. Now Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith, albeit a signs-based faith. He says that they sought him out because their stomachs had been filled; nothing more than that. What they should be looking for is the eternal life-producing gift of food that only the Son of Man (John 6:27, 53, 62; cf. John 3:14-15) can give.

The crowd is not convinced. They are more interested in what they can do than in what Jesus will give. Their response to Jesus seems to reflect the Jewish view that following the Law is the source of life (see Sir 17:11; 45:5; and various rabbinic texts). There is nothing that people they can “do” to gain life; life-giving food is a gift, belief in the one whom God has sent, obviously Jesus himself.

In the second section of the gospel reading (vv. 30-33), a pair of questions by the crowd indicates that they understood that Jesus had been talking about belief in himself. They want proof, some “sign” (*semeion*, in the sense of proof of authority and power). After all, they said, our ancestors ate bread from heaven (Ps 78:24), implying that the manna was a gift of Moses. Jesus sets them straight by affirming that the manna was not the gift of Moses, it was a gift of God. Now, says Jesus, God, identified as “my Father,” underscoring the special relationship between Jesus and God, gives the true bread (*ton alethinon*) bread from heaven. “True” is a significant Johannine qualifier. It says not only that the bread, the food, that is given is real or authentic but also that it is the bread whose value is beyond that of all other breads, the bread beyond compare (See the use of *alethinous*, “true,” in John 1:9; 15:1). This bread and this bread alone is life-giving. In Jesus’ statement, we can see a hint of the eucharist.

The third section of the reading (vv. 34-35) begins with the crowd asking that this gift of bread be given to them again and again (the connotation of *pantote*, “always”). Jesus responds with one of the Fourth Gospel’s “I am” sayings: “I am the bread of life.” As is the case throughout the gospel the predicates of the “I am” sayings express what Jesus does, not who he is. In this case, Jesus identifies himself with life-giving bread; he is the one who gives life. He underscores the idea by saying that those who receive this bread will never again hunger and thirst. His “never” (*me popote*) contrasts with the “always” (*pantote*) of the crowd’s demand.

BROKEN FOR US

The back-and-forth between the crowd and Jesus suggests that we identify with the crowd. What is it that we want from Jesus? What is it that we want from God, Jesus’ Father and our Father (cf. John 20:17). Do we expect to receive transitory realities, things that satisfy us for the moment but leave us wanting for more? Do we say to God or to Jesus, keep on (*pantote*) giving us the things that we want, maybe even need? Or do we see the life-giving gift of the eucharist as God’s gift to us par excellence?

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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1 Kings 19:4-8 tells the story of an angel providing the weary Elijah with something to eat and some water to drink.

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Ephesians 4:30-5:2 describes what we must avoid and what we must do if we are to live as God’s beloved children.

John 6:41-51 is a short narrative in which the naiveté of “the crowd” turns to conflict with “the Jews”--mentioned here for the first time in John 6. The narrative begins with the Jews taking issue with Jesus because of his self-identification as the bread of life (John 6:35; cf. last week’s gospel reading), the bread from heaven (John 6:33). They understand Jesus’ claims to mean that he has descended from the Father (John 6:32) but object that this cannot be since they know his human father and mother.

Jesus tells them to stop grumbling and explains his relationship with the Father. If anyone comes to believe in him, it is because of the Father. The person who believes, who has life through Jesus (John 6:33) will be raised on the last day. Jesus will be the Father’s agent in raising them up. Their resurrection completes the thought of their having (eternal) life (cf. v. 47).

But there is more to the relationship between Jesus and the Father than that. Jesus is the one who makes the Father known (cf. John 1:18). The prophet had said, “They shall all be taught by God” (note the use of the future in the quotation from Isa 54:13). The person who wants to learn from God must come to Jesus because Jesus is the only one who has seen the Father. It is Jesus, not the Law, who reveals the Father and is the source of eternal life, as Jesus emphasizes in the “Amen, Amen, I say to you [cf. John 6:26, 32], whoever believes has eternal life” (v. 47).

The last section of the reading (vv. 48-51) reiterates the “I am” saying of verse 35 and pursues the comparison of the two breads from heaven that was introduced in last week’s gospel reading. True, says Jesus, your ancestors ate the bread/manna in the desert (cf. John 6:31). Nonetheless the entire Exodus generation has passed away. They have all died. There is, however, bread that far surpasses the manna. This is the bread come down from heaven, the source of eternal life. The idea of eternal life is stressed with the contrasting “not die” and “live forever” of verses 50-51. Because this bread, the bread that Jesus gives, is the source of eternal life, this bread can be called “living bread.”

The focus is on Jesus who is this living bread, a life-giving bread that he himself will give. The affirmation is surprising and is made even more surprising by Jesus’ identification of this bread with his own flesh (*sarx mou*, an expression that leads to the conflict whose story will be told in next week’s gospel reading), and proclaims that this bread is the source of life for the world (*tou kosmou*), not just for the Jews whose ancestors ate bread from heaven at the time of the Exodus.

BROKEN FOR US

How often have we heard people say, “Get a life!” But what is life? What life really is is not what people generally mean when they say, “Get a life!”

Today’s gospel reading tells us a lot about life. First of all, it reminds us that life is a gift, a gift that comes to us from the Father, through Jesus. While this is preeminently true of eternal life, it is also true of physical life.

Second, life to be fully lived includes knowledge of the Father, mediated through Jesus. To live life to the full, we must be taught by God and live by that teaching.

Third, life is not a matter of individual existence. Our life must be seen within the perspective of the whole world. The final verse of today’s gospel reading reminds us that Jesus gave himself “for the life of the world,” the world to which each of us belongs.

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THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY August 15, 2012

LITURGY

Revelation 11:19a; 12:16a, 10ab contains excerpts from the Book of Revelation’s description of the appearance of a sign in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun.

1 Corinthians 15:20-27 stresses the order in God’s unfolding of eschatological events.

Luke 1:39-56 is a beautiful tale of the meeting of two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, the women of the immediately preceding annunciation narratives in Luke’s gospel (Luke 1:5-25, 26-38). The story focuses on what the two women have to say. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that, using words in this way, the evangelist employs the style of ancient historians who used speeches to interpret history rather than to give a verbatim report of what was actually said (see *The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991], 43).

Elizabeth is identified as a prophetic figure, someone filled with the Holy Spirit who has something to say as a result. She proclaims that both Mary and the child in her womb are specially chosen by God; they are “blessed” (*eulogemene, eulogemenos*). Elizabeth considers herself to be privileged insofar as she has received a visit from the “mother of my Lord,” a striking title for the young woman from a little town in Galilee. Elizabeth interprets the movement of the child in her own womb as an expression of joy at the visit of the Lord and his mother. Elizabeth’s final beatitude is perhaps most striking. Mary is accounted “blessed” (*makaria*) because she believed the word of God (cf. Luke 11:27-28).

Mary’s words, the Magnificat, seem to be patterned after the similar words of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10. Mary’s song, the “Canticle of Mary,” begins with her praising God for what God has personally done for her. She identifies herself as a “servant” (*he doule*), language that she had used in her response to Gabriel (Luke 1:28). She announces that all generations will call her blessed. The first to do so was Elizabeth who had proclaimed that Mary was blessed (v. 45). Mary calls God “my savior,” introducing the theme of salvation which is so important in Luke’s gospel (cf. Luke 19:9; etc.). God is not only Savior, God is also almighty; his name is holy. As is customary in the biblical tradition, “name” represents the manifestation of God.

After extolling God for what God has done for her, Mary’s words move beyond her own situation to all those who fear God. Biblical anthropomorphisms are used to describe God’s attitude (“mercy,” vv. 50, 54) and activity (“strength of his arm,” v. 51). The song retrospectively and generically looks upon God’s relationship with Israel. It is a history of God’s reversing positions. God has taken care of the lowly and the hungry while punishing the arrogant, the all too powerful rulers, and the rich. What God has done in the past, he will continue to do in the future. God’s past actions presage future eschatological reversal (cf. Luke 6:20-21, 24-25).

The first chapters of Luke’s gospel, especially Luke 1-2, place Jesus’ ministry within the perspective of the history of Israel. Mary’s song does this in its mention of God’s servant, Israel, and of Abraham and his descendants. The promise that God made to them will endure forever. God’s word shall be fulfilled.

The brief mention of Mary’s departure completes the narrative framework (vv. 39-40, 56) that encompasses the speech of the Elizabeth and the song of Mary.

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BROKEN FOR US

The words of the two women are part of the Christian prayer book. Elizabeth’s encomium is used in the familiar “Hail Mary;” Mary’s song is used daily in the office of Evening Prayer.

On this Feast of the Assumption, the homilist might want to talk about either or both of these prayers. Nonetheless, the homilist should not fail to evoke the memory of Mary as a woman of faith. She believed the word of the Lord that had been spoken to her. She understood that what God had done for her had to be understood within the context of salvation and God’s plan of eschatological reversal. In the narratives of the canonical gospels, Mary’s faith is her pre-eminent trait.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME August 19, 2012

LITURGY

Proverbs 9:1-6 portrays Lady Wisdom as preparing meat and wine for a meal. Then, when all is ready, offering an invitation to eat.

Ephesians 5:15-20 describes the indwelling of the Spirit as issuing forth with psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and thanksgiving.

John 6:51-58 is a reading that begins with an *incipit*, a slightly modified version of the one found in John 6:35, and a repetition of the last verse in last Sunday’s reading from John 6.

The “Jews” who first appeared in the narrative at John 6:41 now reappear (v. 52). They grumble about Jesus’ affirmation that he was going to give them bread to eat and that the bread that he would give would be his own flesh. The dispute is about eating, the theme introduced by the citation of Ps 78:24, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat,” in verse 31. Thus far in the Discourse on the Bread of Life, Jesus’ midrash on the scripture has focused on the first part of the verse, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat,” the bread from heaven. Now the focus turns to the end of the verse, the words “to eat.” “Eat” (*esthio*) will occur four times in today’s gospel reading (vv. 51, 52, 53, 58).

Once again, Jesus underscores the truth of what he is saying by using the introductory formula, “Amen, amen, I say to you” (cf. John 6:26, 32, 47). Identifying himself as the Son of Man (cf. John 6:27, 62), Jesus says that he will nourish the world with the gift of himself, his flesh and blood, his life and death. The repetition of “flesh and blood” (*sarx kai haima*), a pairing that recurs four times in today’s reading (vv. 53, 54, 55, 56) underscores the reality of the gift that he will give, the gift of his very self.

The English translation of verse 54, “Whoever eats (*trogon*) my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” masks an important change in the evangelist’s language. Thus far, he has spoken about eating, using the verb *esthio*, the usual verb meaning “eat.” Now, the evangelist uses the verb *trogo*, which means “chew” or “masticate,” really “bite into.” Translated as “eat” in verse 54, the verb is translated as “feeds on” in verse 57. The realism of the evangelist’s image could hardly be more apparent.

The Passover context of the discourse must not be overlooked (cf. John 6:4). In the background of Jesus’ words lays the image of the manna that the ancestors of the Jews had eaten. Notwithstanding their eating of the manna, that entire generation had all died (v. 58). In contrast with those who died, those who eat Jesus’ flesh and blood will live forever. This is the teaching

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that Jesus now imparts in the name of his Father (cf. John 6:45). The Father is identified as the “living” Father (v. 57), the primal trait of God in the Old Testament.

There is a chain of life that goes from the Father to Jesus and from Jesus to those who eat his flesh and drink his blood. The evangelist introduces the idea of mutual “abiding” (*meno*, translated as “remains” in the NAB) in verse 56. The motif will be further elaborated in John 15:4-7 and is a link in another Johannine chain. Jesus abides in the Father and the Father in him (John 14:10). Jesus abides in the disciples and the disciples in him.

BROKEN FOR US

There is a major discussion among exegetes as to whether this final section of the Discourse on the Bread of Life continues to focus on revelation or whether it is basically eucharistic. Notwithstanding the exegetical controversy—even among Catholic exegetes—there can be no doubt that the evangelist uses language that evokes the eucharist in the midrash on the psalm’s “to eat.” In the eucharist, the believer eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, abides in Jesus and in the Father, and receives the gift of life that the Son of Man has received from his living Father.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **August 26, 2012**

LITURGY

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b describes the Israelites pledging fealty to the Lord after Joshua had challenged them to make a decision.

Ephesians 5:21-32 is the first part of the three-part household code found in Eph 5:21-6:9.

John 6:60-69 is the last of the five readings from John 6 that have been intercalated into Cycle B’s semi-continuous reading of Mark. The gospel lection is easily divided into two contrasting units. The first unit (vv. 60-66) describes those who find Jesus’ teaching difficult to accept. The contrasting second unit (vv. 67-69) describes the belief of the Twelve, a group who appear here for the first time in the Johannine narrative.

The first unit of the reading (vv. 60-66) begins by noting that a large group of Jesus’ followers found that what he had to say was “hard,” that is, difficult to accept, offensive, rather than simply difficult to understand. Jesus challenges these disciples head-on, “Does what I have to say shock you?” The reader of the episode may wonder whether it is just the last section of the Bread of Life Discourse (last Sunday’s gospel, John 6:51-58) or the entire discourse that was problematic for them. Most probably the evangelist envisioned their taking offense at the entire discourse.

Did the group of disciples who found what Jesus had to say hard to take need proof? Would they be satisfied if the Son of Man ascended into heaven (cf. John 3:13), as the developing rabbinic tradition thought that Moses ascended into heaven (cf. *Exodus Rabbah* 28:1; etc.)? The entire discourse had been about how much greater than Moses Jesus was. Jesus’ rhetorical question, not further pursued, is intended to dismiss the disciples’ merely human point of view.

Looking for proof is “fleshy;” it is a merely human way of looking at things. Faith cannot be proven; it comes from the Spirit and from the Father who, together, give life and faith. The evangelist points to Jesus’ super-human knowledge when he says that Jesus knew that some

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of his auditors would not believe; they would return to the Judaism and the Law that they had followed. He also knew that one of the Twelve would betray him. The evangelist elaborates on this bit of knowledge in John 6:70-71, verses that have been omitted from today’s gospel lection. The first unit concludes with the departure of those who did not really believe.

The second unit (vv. 67-69) contrasts the non-believers with the Twelve who steadfastly believe the words of Jesus. The Twelve have not previously appeared in the Fourth Gospel. Simon Peter hasn’t appeared since John 1:40-42, the short story of his call. The evangelist reflects early Christian tradition in presenting this group, with Peter as their spokesperson, as remaining—with the exception of Judas—faithful to Jesus.

Jesus questions the Twelve (v. 67) as he had questioned the larger group of disciples (v. 61). Speaking on behalf of the others—note the evangelist’s use of the first person plural—Peter makes one of the most important professions of faith in the Fourth Gospel. Not only does he confess that Jesus’ revelation is life-giving (cf. v. 63b); he also proclaims that Jesus is the “Holy One of God.” Apart from Mark 1:24, this title is not otherwise used of Jesus in the canonical gospels.

A final note: “We have come to believe and are convinced” is literally “come to believe [*pepisteukamen*] and know [*ennokamen*],” two important Johannine terms that are virtually synonymous.

BROKEN FOR US

We who listen to Jesus’ words have a choice to make. Do we find his words tough to take and go away from him, even if we do not stop going to church? Or do we find his words life-giving, finding in them, rather than in wealth or any other human possession, the source of real life and ultimate value? In short, do we identify with the “many disciples” of verse 60 or “the Twelve” of verse 67? Jesus questioned both groups, asking for a decision. Similarly, he questions us, asking us to make the decision that really matters.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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LITURGY

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Revelation 11:19a; 12:16a, 10ab contains excerpts from the Book of Revelation’s description of the appearance of a sign in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun.

1 Corinthians 15:20-27 stresses the order in God’s unfolding of eschatological events.

Luke 1:39-56 is a beautiful tale of the meeting of two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, the women of the immediately preceding annunciation narratives in Luke’s gospel (Luke 1:5-25, 26-38). The story focuses on what the two women have to say. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that, using words in this way, the evangelist employs the style of ancient historians who used speeches to interpret history rather than to give a verbatim report of what was actually said (see *The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991], 43).

Elizabeth is identified as a prophetic figure, someone filled with the Holy Spirit who has something to say as a result. She proclaims that both Mary and the child in her womb are specially chosen by God; they are “blessed” (*eulogemene, eulogemenos*). Elizabeth considers herself to be privileged insofar as she has received a visit from the “mother of my Lord,” a striking title for the young woman from a little town in Galilee. Elizabeth interprets the movement of the child in her own womb as an expression of joy at the visit of the Lord and his mother. Elizabeth’s final beatitude is perhaps most striking. Mary is accounted “blessed” (*makaria*) because she believed the word of God (cf. Luke 11:27-28).

Mary’s words, the Magnificat, seem to be patterned after the similar words of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10. Mary’s song, the “Canticle of Mary,” begins with her praising God for what God has personally done for her. She identifies herself as a “servant” (*he doule*), language that she had used in her response to Gabriel (Luke 1:28). She announces that all generations will call her blessed. The first to do so was Elizabeth who had proclaimed that Mary was blessed (v. 45). Mary calls God “my savior,” introducing the theme of salvation which is so important in Luke’s gospel (cf. Luke 19:9; etc.). God is not only Savior, God is also almighty; his name is holy. As is customary in the biblical tradition, “name” represents the manifestation of God.

After extolling God for what God has done for her, Mary’s words move beyond her own situation to all those who fear God. Biblical anthropomorphisms are used to describe God’s attitude (“mercy,” vv. 50, 54) and activity (“strength of his arm,” v. 51). The song retrospectively and generically looks upon God’s relationship with Israel. It is a history of God’s reversing positions. God has taken care of the lowly and the hungry while punishing the arrogant, the all too powerful rulers, and the rich. What God has done in the past, he will continue to do in the future. God’s past actions presage future eschatological reversal (cf. Luke 6:20-21, 24-25).

The first chapters of Luke’s gospel, especially Luke 1-2, place Jesus’ ministry within the perspective of the history of Israel. Mary’s song does this in its mention of God’s servant, Israel, and of Abraham and his descendants. The promise that God made to them will endure forever. God’s word shall be fulfilled.

The brief mention of Mary’s departure completes the narrative framework (vv. 39-40, 56) that encompasses the speech of the Elizabeth and the song of Mary.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118:4 (2012) 354-375 by Raymond F. Collins.

BROKEN FOR US

The words of the two women are part of the Christian prayer book. Elizabeth’s encomium is used in the familiar “Hail Mary;” Mary’s song is used daily in the office of Evening Prayer.

On this Feast of the Assumption, the homilist might want to talk about either or both of these prayers. Nonetheless, the homilist should not fail to evoke the memory of Mary as a woman of faith. She believed the word of the Lord that had been spoken to her. She understood that what God had done for her had to be understood within the context of salvation and God’s plan of eschatological reversal. In the narratives of the canonical gospels, Mary’s faith is her pre-eminent trait.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 19, 2012

LITURGY

Proverbs 9:1-6 portrays Lady Wisdom as preparing meat and wine for a meal. Then, when all is ready, offering an invitation to eat.

Ephesians 5:15-20 describes the indwelling of the Spirit as issuing forth with psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and thanksgiving.

John 6:51-58 is a reading that begins with an *incipit*, a slightly modified version of the one found in John 6:35, and a repetition of the last verse in last Sunday’s reading from John 6.

The “Jews” who first appeared in the narrative at John 6:41 now reappear (v. 52). They grumble about Jesus’ affirmation that he was going to give them bread to eat and that the bread that he would give would be his own flesh. The dispute is about eating, the theme introduced by the citation of Ps 78:24, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat,” in verse 31. Thus far in the Discourse on the Bread of Life, Jesus’ midrash on the scripture has focused on the first part of the verse, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat,” the bread from heaven. Now the focus turns to the end of the verse, the words “to eat.” “Eat” (*esthio*) will occur four times in today’s gospel reading (vv. 51, 52, 53, 58).

Once again, Jesus underscores the truth of what he is saying by using the introductory formula, “Amen, amen, I say to you” (cf. John 6:26, 32, 47). Identifying himself as the Son of Man (cf. John 6:27, 62), Jesus says that he will nourish the world with the gift of himself, his flesh and blood, his life and death. The repetition of “flesh and blood” (*sarx kai haima*), a pairing that recurs four times in today’s reading (vv. 53, 54, 55, 56) underscores the reality of the gift that he will give, the gift of his very self.

The English translation of verse 54, “Whoever eats (*trogon*) my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” masks an important change in the evangelist’s language. Thus far, he has spoken about eating, using the verb *esthio*, the usual verb meaning “eat.” Now, the evangelist uses the verb *trogo*, which means “chew” or “masticate,” really “bite into.” Translated as “eat” in verse 54, the verb is translated as “feeds on” in verse 57. The realism of the evangelist’s image could hardly be more apparent.

The Passover context of the discourse must not be overlooked (cf. John 6:4). In the background of Jesus’ words lays the image of the manna that the ancestors of the Jews had eaten. Notwithstanding their eating of the manna, that entire generation had all died (v. 58). In contrast

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with those who died, those who eat Jesus’ flesh and blood will live forever. This is the teaching that Jesus now imparts in the name of his Father (cf. John 6:45). The Father is identified as the “living” Father (v. 57), the primal trait of God in the Old Testament.

There is a chain of life that goes from the Father to Jesus and from Jesus to those who eat his flesh and drink his blood. The evangelist introduces the idea of mutual “abiding” (*meno*, translated as “remains” in the NAB) in verse 56. The motif will be further elaborated in John 15:4-7 and is a link in another Johannine chain. Jesus abides in the Father and the Father in him (John 14:10). Jesus abides in the disciples and the disciples in him.

BROKEN FOR US

There is a major discussion among exegetes as to whether this final section of the Discourse on the Bread of Life continues to focus on revelation or whether it is basically eucharistic. Notwithstanding the exegetical controversy—even among Catholic exegetes—there can be no doubt that the evangelist uses language that evokes the eucharist in the midrash on the psalm’s “to eat.” In the eucharist, the believer eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, abides in Jesus and in the Father, and receives the gift of life that the Son of Man has received from his living Father.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 26, 2012

LITURGY

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b describes the Israelites pledging fealty to the Lord after Joshua had challenged them to make a decision.

Ephesians 5:21-32 is the first part of the three-part household code found in Eph 5:21-6:9.

John 6:60-69 is the last of the five readings from John 6 that have been intercalated into Cycle B’s semi-continuous reading of Mark. The gospel lection is easily divided into two contrasting units. The first unit (vv. 60-66) describes those who find Jesus’ teaching difficult to accept. The contrasting second unit (vv. 67-69) describes the belief of the Twelve, a group who appear here for the first time in the Johannine narrative.

The first unit of the reading (vv. 60-66) begins by noting that a large group of Jesus’ followers found that what he had to say was “hard,” that is, difficult to accept, offensive, rather than simply difficult to understand. Jesus challenges these disciples head-on, “Does what I have to say shock you?” The reader of the episode may wonder whether it is just the last section of the Bread of Life Discourse (last Sunday’s gospel, John 6:51-58) or the entire discourse that was problematic for them. Most probably the evangelist envisioned their taking offense at the entire discourse.

Did the group of disciples who found what Jesus had to say hard to take need proof? Would they be satisfied if the Son of Man ascended into heaven (cf. John 3:13), as the developing rabbinic tradition thought that Moses ascended into heaven (cf. *Exodus Rabbah* 28:1; etc.)? The entire discourse had been about how much greater than Moses Jesus was. Jesus’ rhetorical question, not further pursued, is intended to dismiss the disciples’ merely human point of view.

Looking for proof is “fleshy;” it is a merely human way of looking at things. Faith cannot be proven; it comes from the Spirit and from the Father who, together, give life and faith.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118:4 (2012) 354-375 by Raymond F. Collins.

The evangelist points to Jesus’ super-human knowledge when he says that Jesus knew that some of his auditors would not believe; they would return to the Judaism and the Law that they had followed. He also knew that one of the Twelve would betray him. The evangelist elaborates on this bit of knowledge in John 6:70-71, verses that have been omitted from today’s gospel lection. The first unit concludes with the departure of those who did not really believe.

The second unit (vv. 67-69) contrasts the non-believers with the Twelve who steadfastly believe the words of Jesus. The Twelve have not previously appeared in the Fourth Gospel. Simon Peter hasn’t appeared since John 1:40-42, the short story of his call. The evangelist reflects early Christian tradition in presenting this group, with Peter as their spokesperson, as remaining—with the exception of Judas—faithful to Jesus.

Jesus questions the Twelve (v. 67) as he had questioned the larger group of disciples (v. 61). Speaking on behalf of the others—note the evangelist’s use of the first person plural—Peter makes one of the most important professions of faith in the Fourth Gospel. Not only does he confess that Jesus’ revelation is life-giving (cf. v. 63b); he also proclaims that Jesus is the “Holy One of God.” Apart from Mark 1:24, this title is not otherwise used of Jesus in the canonical gospels.

A final note: “We have come to believe and are convinced” is literally “come to believe [*pepisteukamen*] and know [*ennokamen*],” two important Johannine terms that are virtually synonymous.

BROKEN FOR US

We who listen to Jesus’ words have a choice to make. Do we find his words tough to take and go away from him, even if we do not stop going to church? Or do we find his words life-giving, finding in them, rather than in wealth or any other human possession, the source of real life and ultimate value? In short, do we identify with the “many disciples” of verse 60 or “the Twelve” of verse 67? Jesus questioned both groups, asking for a decision. Similarly, he questions us, asking us to make the decision that really matters.