

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

August 23, 2015 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

As we approach the end of August, we can't help but realize that it's time to think about returning to school. Many college campuses are already returning to normal, and many of our Catholic secondary and elementary schools here in the Diocese are gearing up to begin the Fall semester later this week. Even for those of us who have "graduated" into other life responsibilities, when it's time to "return to school", it affects us all in one way or another.

Over the last several weeks at our Sunday Eucharistic celebrations, we've been listening to a continuous reading from the 6th Chapter of St. John's Gospel, which is known as "the Bread of Life Discourse." In some ways, we could see this very long and beautiful 6th chapter as an analogy for Jesus, the Teacher, who convened a special "class" for His disciples (which of course means "students") on the most basic and profoundly important insight into His Gospel message.

You will recall that this discourse, or "class lesson", began six weeks ago when Jesus performed the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes----that huge crowd of over 5,000 people, who had been following Him and hanging on His every word, had become extremely hungry, and there was no place for them to get any food. So, Jesus took the five loaves of bread and two fish that were available, and miraculously provided, not only the bare minimum amount of food, but a great abundance---with 12 baskets full left over after everyone had had as much as they wanted. As a result this crowd got the wrong idea, and thought that if they continued following Jesus, He would keep working those kinds of miracles and provide for all their human needs. That's why He began to try to straighten them out---to clarify for them and teach them the truth about what He had done, why He had done it, and what was truly most important---even more important than perishable food.

The "students," both the "regular disciples" and those others who were hanging around, were having a very hard time with this "class." It was great when they witnessed that amazing miracle, and benefitted from it by eating to their hearts content on the mountainside. But then, when Jesus starting teaching what that all meant, all of a sudden they weren't so sure.

That is what we heard at the beginning of today's Gospel passage, "*Many of Jesus' disciples...said: 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'*". St. John tells us: "*As a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life, and no longer accompanied Him.*"

This teaching was just too hard. Jesus remained the confident Teacher. His response was: "*Does this shock you?...the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*" When many of the disciples began to walk away, Jesus didn't run after them and say: Hey, wait a minute---Let me change or revise what I've said. He didn't say, "Would you stay if I taught something easier?" Peter received an A+ when Jesus asked the Twelve: "*Do you also want to leave?*" Peter had one of those brilliant insights, rooted in his deep love for and trust in Jesus, when he said: "*Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

Dear Friends, what about us? Are we "fair-weather" disciples---those who follow Jesus as long as it's easy, or as long as it makes sense, or as long as He teaches, or the Church teaches, what we agree with? Jesus came to teach the Truth, and the Truth is not always easy. All of us know that there are "hard truths" about life. And if that's true, then it's certainly true that there are hard teachings when it comes to our own faith life.

As Catholics----as people of faith----as disciples (that is, "students") of Jesus we realize that there are many things that are beyond our comprehension; to be a person of faith means that we must believe and trust more deeply. We should in a sense copy from Peter's test page and use his response when we find some of God's Ways, or aspects of our faith, or teachings of Jesus or the Church to be too hard, or not making logical sense: "Master, to whom, or where else, would we go? You are the Master---You are the Son of God----You are the One who has won salvation for me, and for all the world. If you say so, that's good enough for me, because You have the words of eternal life!

Of course, that is something that each and every one of us has to come to for ourselves.

It seems clear to me that there are many people today trying to convince themselves that they do not need God; that they do not need to follow Jesus' Truth in their lives; that they do not need to come to Mass or receive the sacraments. They have joined the group we heard about in today's Gospel who "*returned to their former way of life*" so they can focus more on those perishable things: like food, money, and earthly pleasures as the most important focus of life.

The age-old question, as we heard in today's First Reading from the Book of Joshua, and the question that each of us has to honestly answer for ourselves, is: "*If it does not please you*

to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve.” I hope that all of us here will say the same thing that Joshua, and the people of Israel said as they ended their 40 years of wandering in the desert, and prepared to enter into the Promised Land: “*As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*”

Dear family of faith, there are many wonderful, mysterious, controversial, and challenging aspects of our Catholic Christian faith. There may be times when we too might legitimately say: “This is a hard saying.” But, that’s when we need to listen to the rest of what good-old Peter said to Jesus that merited him an A+ on his final test: “*We have come to believe, and are convinced, that you are the Holy One of God.*”

None of us here has all the answers to life’s hard truths. There are some things that simply cannot be explained; there are many realities and Truths that lay beyond our ability to see, hear, touch and dissect. Jesus is our Master Teacher; He has identified Himself as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” An incredibly beautiful part of that Truth is: “*I am the Living Bread come down from Heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever.*” That is the essence of the teaching on the central mystery of our faith---the Gift of the Holy Eucharist.

Dear friends, each week, we have the great privilege of gathering together to celebrate the Eucharist, “*the Living Bread come down from Heaven.*” It does not take an Albert Einstein to give us the right answer. May we answer with St. Peter: Master, You are the answer to our questions, and You are the Eternal Bread that fills our spirits. “We have come to believe, and are convinced, that You are the Holy One of God....because you have the words of eternal life.”

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ, + Bishop Paul J. Bradley