

April 28, 2023

## The bread of life

Jn 6:52-59

*Then the Jews started arguing among themselves, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' Jesus replied to them: In all truth I tell you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise that person up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me. This is the bread which has come down from heaven; it is not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever. This is what he taught at Capernaum in the synagogue.*

The words we hear from the Lord today are not easy to understand. However, even if we do not understand everything, the Lord actually adapts himself here to our way of thinking, and especially to the way of thinking of the Jews of that time.

The misunderstanding of the Lord's words and of the Christian sacraments reached such a point that, in the pagan-Roman world, Christians were at first thought to be practising cannibalism in their strange and secret rites, believing that they were actually eating human flesh and blood.

Their story reminded the Jews that God had sent down manna from heaven to feed His people in the wilderness, and later also nourished them with quails (cf. Ex 16).

Jesus alludes to this manna, and wants to make it clear to His hearers that He Himself is this bread that came down from heaven. The Israelites needed the manna to survive in the desert. And now the Lord wants the Jews to understand that, just as they need bread to live, so they need Him. Their bodies can preserve life only by taking in nourishment. In the same way, the soul needs the Lord, who gives Himself as food. Supernatural life can only unfold and flourish in us if we eat of this bread and drink of this blood.

In speaking of the blood, reference is made to the sacrifices, which were essential in Jewish worship. They were a symbol of the forgiveness of sins. With the death of the Lord, who is our atoning sacrifice, the lamb led to the slaughter, all the former sacrifices take on their true meaning as a preparation for the one sacrifice of Christ.

The meaning of all these words of the Lord is revealed to us in the Holy Mass, which is the actualisation of His sacrifice. In Holy Communion, Christ is symbolically and truly given to us as spiritual food, which nourishes our inner life. If we receive Him in a state of grace, the Lord unites Himself more and more to us, and we can live from Him.

In many ways that suit our human understanding, the Lord wants us to understand the mystery of His coming, the mystery of His Person.

He did not come to meet us on the clouds of heaven and wrapped in all His glory, as He will do at His Second Coming at the End of Time. Rather, we see Him as a man, who, despite the miracle of His virginal conception, has a mother, like all of us, and a nurturing father, St. Joseph. God becomes a child and allows Himself to be treated as a child is treated. Here too God wants to make Himself known to us and enters into our human history: Jesus is given a name, the place where He grew up is known, we know who His disciples were... We could go on listing the various ways in which God makes Himself present to us, right up to His presence in the Church, through the successors of the apostles, the bishops; and through the successor of Peter, the Pope.

All this makes it clear to us that the coming of the Lord is not simply a myth or a pious story that conveys a moral. No! It is really about the coming of the Son of God into the world, to redeem mankind! He gives His own life to pay for our sins and to rescue us from the power of evil.

In the actualisation of His Passion and Death in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the fruits of Redemption are given to us. True life is to believe in Him, to abide in His Word, to receive sacramentally His body and blood. *"As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me."*

Thus, we see that this passage, in all its depth, can be very simple for us to understand. Just as we need daily nourishment to keep us alive, so we need God day after day, so

that the eternal life, which we will obtain in fullness after this life, can begin to unfold from now on. Jesus does not only want to pass this on to us theoretically, but gives us everything so that we can acquire this life.