

Jesus, the Bread of Life

For the past several weeks the gospels we have heard at Mass have been taken from the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel, in which Jesus gives his "Bread of Life Discourse." Since we are now at the end of this teaching on the Bread of Life, I am dedicating this column to recapping what we have heard so that you can read John 6 with understanding.

John 6 begins with the miracle of the loaves, when Jesus feeds the 5000 people with five barley loaves and two fish. The next day, the crowd meets Jesus again, looking for another free meal! But Jesus tells the people not to work for the bread that perishes but for the food that will give them eternal life. When the crowd asks Jesus what they must do, he tells them there is only one thing they need to do: *believe in the one whom God has sent into the world*. The crowd, however, does not understand why it should believe in Jesus, and so the people challenge him: what kind of sign can you give us so that we can believe in you? After all, Moses gave our ancestors bread from heaven when they were wandering in the wilderness.

It is at this point that Jesus begins his Bread of Life Discourse, in which he explains that *he* is the bread of life, the one whom God has sent into the world for the life of the world. At first the crowd is very interested in what Jesus says, and the people ask him to give them this food so that they may have life. But they do not yet understand what Jesus means.

The food of which Jesus is speaking is no ordinary food. *He himself* is the bread of life because God has sent him into the world. But how is he the bread of life? What does it mean to call him the bread of life? Jesus is the bread of life because he gives his life for the life of the world by his saving death on the cross. His death is the moment when he gives his body and blood for the salvation of the world.

But the crowd still does not understand what Jesus is talking about since he has not yet died. And so the people murmur about him and they ask how Jesus can claim to be the bread of life that has come down from heaven. After all, they know him—or at least they think they do. It is at this point that Jesus introduces the language of "eating" and says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give is my *flesh* for the life of the world."

The crowd is more confused than ever, and the people ask, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" But Jesus insists that they will not have life if they do not eat his body and drink his blood, and he promises them that "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life *and I will raise him on the last day*." What the crowd does not understand is that Jesus is talking about the Eucharist, which will allow future generations to share in the benefits of his saving death and resurrection.

What Jesus says in John 6 can be summarized in two points. First, Jesus himself is the bread of life because he is the one who came down from heaven to give his life on the cross for the life of the world. Second, we continue to share in Jesus, the bread of life, every time we receive the Eucharist. And every time we receive the Eucharist, we receive the promise and pledge of eternal life. Read John 6 again and again. Receive the Eucharist again and again, and you will have life—eternal life that will not end.

Father Matera