**Homily for the 21st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**August 22, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b (Decide today whom you will serve.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 34 (Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 5:21-32 (Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.)*

*Gospel: John 6:60-69 (To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.)*

Throughout the gospels, we see crowds of people following Jesus everywhere he goes, hanging on his every word, and exclaiming astonishment at the wisdom and authority with which he preaches. Usually, the only people opposing Jesus are the religious leaders, who have closed their minds and hearts to him. But, today’s gospel shows a mass revolt against Jesus. He has been telling the crowd that he is the bread come down from heaven to give life to the world, and that everyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood will have eternal life. St. John reports, “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” Jesus even wonders if his hand-picked disciples might abandon him. No doubt, his words were just as difficult for the Twelve to understand and accept. However, Peter articulates a key difference between them and the rest of the crowd when he says, “You have the words of everlasting life. We have come to *believe* and are *convinced* that you are the Holy One of God.” Unlike the rest of the crowd, they were willing to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt and hope that the meaning of his teaching would eventually become clear to them.

There are many reasons why people reject the Word of God that is preached to them. This incident in the Gospel shows us one such reason. Jesus was revealing a mystery that the people were not yet equipped to understand. All of this talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood sounded like utter nonsense. How could anybody take it seriously? But, of course, it was the truth. Jesus was introducing a concept that would later become central to our Christian faith and the sacramental life of the Church! The disciples who remained with Jesus did so not because they understood the concept of Eucharist, but because they trusted that Jesus would not lead them astray. This is similar to what happens when children and adult catechumens are first exposed to the mysteries of the Christian faith. They cannot fully and immediately grasp what is presented to them, because that’s the nature of divine mysteries. So, the choice to believe begins as a matter of *trust* – trust in the Church, its pastoral leaders, and the community of faith, all of whom profess the beliefs that are being presented as divinely revealed.

The first reading, from the Book of Joshua, shows us another reason why people sometimes struggle to accept the Word of God. In this case, Joshua was trying to impress upon the people the absolute necessity to reject false gods and worship *only* the one true God of Israel. Even if the Israelites could grasp the principle of the commandment, it might have been difficult, for cultural reasons, for them to understand why this was such a big deal. The pagans routinely adopted new gods whenever they moved from one place to another. Why couldn’t the followers of Yahweh do the same thing? This is similar to the resistance that people often express to Christian teachings that are countercultural. For example, Jesus commands us to love our enemies, to forgive without limit, to renounce any desire for vengeance, to give generously to those in need, and to remain chaste in all our thoughts and actions. All of these values, unfortunately, are out-of-step with American culture, which heavily emphasizes personal freedom and individual rights over mercy, personal discipline, and concern for the common good. Hence, many American Christians might be inclined to accept Jesus’ teachings *in principle*, but not feel too much urgency to practice them consistently and conscientiously.

Culture can impede us from hearing the Word of God in other ways, too. Consider St. Paul’s teaching in our second reading today, from the Letter to the Ephesians. The main point is stated right up front, in the first sentence: “*Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ*.” If Paul had stopped right there, I don’t think many Christian women or men would object. But, then Paul goes on to apply that general principle to wives and husbands in *his culture*, in which everyone just assumed that men should be dominant over women, both inside and outside the home. Many modern Christians struggle to hear what Paul is saying to the women and men of his day, because they cannot filter out the cultural bias and get down to the Christian values that he is trying to express. Paul is encouraging wives to view the subservience that their culture imposes on them from a *theological* perspective. Instead of subordinating yourself to your husband out of a belief that women are inferior to men, Paul says to do it so that your marriage can reflect the relationship between *Christ and the Church*. The Church is not inferior to Christ, but its dignity and holiness depends on its covenantal relationship with Christ. So it should be with wives and their husbands.

The message for husbands actually would have been much more challenging in Paul’s day than in our own. According to cultural norms, husbands were the masters of their households, with no obligation to treat their wives with respect and tenderness and love. But, Paul says that husbands, too, should *subordinate themselves to their wives* out of reverence for Christ. Husbands should emulate how Christ gives himself completely for the sake of the Church, his beloved bride. Far from having impunity to act selfishly within their own homes, husbands should feel obliged to empty themselves for the sake of their wives and children, sacrificing everything for them. This is a deeply Christian message, which should resonate with modern men, if they can just cut through the cultural noise to hear the Word of God being addressed to them.

The Word of God is often challenging, or even disturbing. Sometimes our first inclination is to reject what we hear, to write it off as incomprehensible, out-of-step with modern times, or just too hard. At times like that, we need to look carefully at ourselves and ask if the obstacle might be within us. If we don’t understand what is being taught or why it is being presented with such urgency, then perhaps we are being called to greater *study*, to improve or deepen our comprehension. If we understand what is being asked of us, but we just don’t want to do it, then perhaps we are being called to greater *prayer and discernment*, to open ourselves to the will of God. In all cases, we should presume that the Word of God will instruct, admonish and challenge us to grow as children of God. Let us try our best to listen and learn.