

## Commentary on Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:25-71 RSV)

<sup>25</sup>When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" <sup>26</sup>Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup>Do not labor for the food which perishes, but the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." <sup>28</sup>Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." <sup>30</sup>So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform?" <sup>31</sup>Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" <sup>32</sup>Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup>For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." <sup>34</sup>They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

<sup>35</sup>Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. <sup>36</sup>But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup>All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out. <sup>38</sup>For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; <sup>39</sup>and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup>For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

<sup>41</sup>The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." <sup>42</sup>They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" <sup>43</sup>Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. <sup>44</sup>No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>45</sup>It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup>Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup>I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup>Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup>This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup>I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

<sup>52</sup>The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" <sup>53</sup>So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; <sup>54</sup>he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>55</sup>For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. <sup>56</sup>He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. <sup>57</sup>As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>This is the bread which came from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever." <sup>59</sup>This he said in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup>Many of his disciples, when they heard of it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" <sup>61</sup>But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offence at this? <sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? <sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have

spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>But there are some of you that do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that should betray him. <sup>65</sup>And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

<sup>66</sup>After this many of the disciples drew back and no longer went with him. <sup>67</sup>Jesus said to the twelve, "Will you also go away?" <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, <sup>69</sup>and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." <sup>70</sup>Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" <sup>71</sup>He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him.

The time is about one year before Jesus' death and resurrection. There are three Passover periods mentioned in Holy Scripture; all of which appear in the Gospel of John:

1. Jn 2:13-23 The cleansing of the temple immediately after the marriage feast at Cana.
2. Jn 6:4 The feeding of the 5,000 which, along with Jesus' walking on water, immediately precede this bread of life discourse.
3. Jn 11:55 Jesus' passion and death.

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark also include miraculous healings, the casting out of demons, and the feeding of the 4,000 prior to this event.

**v25. "other side of the sea"** Jn 6:24 tells us the crowd went to Capernaum, a city on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The place known to be Jesus' center of activity in Galilee. Mt 4:13 notes that He established a residence there. He began His public ministry there by teaching in the synagogue (Mk 1:21 & Lk 4:31). Since Jesus had fled to the mountain alone (Jn 6:15) and the crowd knew that He had not departed with the Apostles (Jn 6:16), they looked for Him where they knew He maintained a home base. "*Rabbi*" In the New Testament, this term is used as a form of address rather than a title (such as The Rabbi). The term means "master" and was the way a student of the scribes would address his teacher. The use of this address to Jesus is significant because, even though they don't know precisely who He is, or what His mission is, they do recognize Him as a religious leader. Recall though that Jesus had fled after the feeding of the 5,000 because He realized they wanted to make Him king. "*when did you come here?*" They are curious about Him. Jesus doesn't answer their question. Rather than reveal another miracle to them (such as His walking on water to get there), which would have reinforced their being impressed by physical (material) things, He steers their attention to His true mission which is spiritual.

**v26. "Truly, truly"** In Hebrew, Greek and Latin "Amen, amen". We normally end our prayers with "amen" but Jesus begins His statement in this manner. Amen means "truly", "so be it", "I do believe". The doubled Amen is a solemn affirmation, an oath. The faithful and true witness is Christ, the Amen (Rev 3:14). Since two witnesses are required to sentence someone to death (Deut 17:6), Jesus is bearing the part of both witnesses and alerting them that what He is going to say has life and death consequences. "*not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves*" They have not understood the true meaning of the signs but instead are now looking for food for the body.

**v27. "food which perishes . . . eternal life"** Food for the body (material food) keeps us alive in this world, spiritual food sustains and develops supernatural life which will last forever; recall that the woman at the well in Jn 4:1-26 was promised living water and that she would never thirst. This spiritual food, only God can give us. Through God's infinite love we are given, in the Blessed Eucharist, Jesus Himself as nourishment for our souls. "*Son of man*" Jesus' favorite designation of Himself; a title which is never applied to Him by the evangelists. This image draws upon Dan 7:13-14; 8:17 where the Son of Man is prefigured as the Messiah who is to usher in the final

days, and also Gen 2:7, the creation account, where in Hebrew "adam" means man and "adama" means earth. Jesus is the new Adam, the one who doesn't fall. The image also reflects back to Ez 37 where God addresses the prophet Ezekiel as "son of man" and uses him to preach to the dry bones which fill a valley and effect a resurrection (this is the inspirational source of the wonderful Negro spiritual "Dem Bones"). The Jews knew their Scriptures very well and would easily make the association between the title He gives Himself and the promises of a messiah, a prophet, and resurrection which are made in these passages. Jesus' use of the term "Son of Man" is a certain indication to His hearers that He claims to have been sent by God. *"set his seal"* Given firm and eternal authority (Neh 9:38, Song 8:6). When a seal is impressed on wax, the wax receives the complete form of the seal. So it is that the Son received the entire form of the Father (Heb 1:3).

**v28.** *"works of God"* Jesus has said that they are to work for food which doesn't perish. Moses gave food for the body but it would perish, now Jesus promises food which remains forever, it is obviously the work of God. How are they to do this?

**v29.** *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent"* They can't do God's work; their task is to believe in Him, and consequently in what He says, in faith (not because of the miracles He does but because of Who sent Him). He who comes from God speaks the words of God (Jn 3:31-34). Belief is not just taking His word for it, belief is total commitment and unquestioning obedience.

**v30.** *"what sign"* Again, they misunderstand Him. They think they are being asked to "put faith" in Jesus in order to credit something He is about to do. They then proceed to prove how material-minded they are. Their enthusiasm over the feeding of the 5,000 is already beginning to wane. That was a short-lived sign. They are hungry again. They want more food for the body, they have not discerned that He is promising spiritual food.

**v31.** *"Our fathers ate manna"* Now the dialog between the crowd and Jesus is beginning to sound even more like the one with the woman at the well: She had asked if He was greater than Jacob (Jn 4:12) and here the people want to know if He can compare with Moses (Ex 16:15). Moses gave food but it would perish, now Jesus promises food which remains forever.

**v32.** *"it was not Moses who gave you"* Jesus reminds them that it was God, not Moses, who provided the manna. *"my Father gives"* He calls Himself the Son of God. He also reminds them that this promised gift is also from God the Father. Note the transition from past tense to present tense "Moses gave - my Father gives".

**v33.** *"the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life"* God's bread is not food for the body but life to the world. Shifts emphasis from 'bread from heaven' to 'bread of God'. *"that which"* Can also be seen an allusion to Himself. The King James Version and New International Versions of the Bible translate this phrase as "he who" rather than "that which". This possible translation is also noted as a footnote in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

**v34.** *"give us this bread"* Still misunderstanding Him, they echo the words of the woman at the well in Jn 4:15. Although they now have a perception that He is not speaking of material bread (like manna), and that He can give this new bread, they do not yet understand that this bread is Himself. *"always"* They are requesting a continual (lifetime) supply. This causes Jesus' response in the next verse.

**v35.** *"I am the"* Jesus specifically identifies Himself with the bread of which He is speaking. *"bread of life"* Like the 'water of life' (Jn 4:10) it satisfies forever. Shifts emphasis from "bread of God" to "bread of life"; the gift of God is everlasting life. The bread of God gives life to the world (verse 33). *"comes to me . . . believes in me"* Equates coming to Him to believing in Him. It is through

faith that we approach our Lord. *"hungry . . . thirst"* Jesus uses the analogy of food and drink to show that He is the one who really meets all of man's noblest aspirations and meets all of man's needs.

**v36.** *"I said to you . . ."* Refers back to verse 26. Seeing is not necessarily believing. Belief makes one see things as they really are. (See also Jn 20:29) **v37.** *"All that the Father gives to me will come to me"* To come to Christ, it is necessary that one be brought by the grace of God. *"him who comes to me I will not cast out"* Christ will not reject from the Kingdom of God those who accept His grace.

**v38.** *"not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me"* This is because He does the work of the Father (Jn 5:19).

**v39.** *"raise it up on the last day"* Not only will those who believe be safe in the Kingdom of God, they shall possess it for all eternity in the final resurrection.

**v40.** *"sees the Son and believes in him"* Refers back to verses 29 and 35. If they truly believe that He has been sent by God, then they will believe and do whatever He tells them; no matter how bizarre it may seem.

**v41.** *"The Jews"* In the Gospel of John, this term is often used to denote representatives of Judaism, its leadership. *"murmured"* This is the same reaction the Jews had toward Moses before they received manna in the desert; when their stomachs grumbled, so did they (Ex 16:2). God then, as now, recognized their grumbling as being against Him because of their lack of belief and trust (Ex 16:8). Even after they had received the manna in the desert, some continued to complain (Num 11:4-6). God silenced these complainers by slaying them (Ps 78:17-33). If these Jews surrounding Jesus don't stop murmuring and start believing, they will suffer spiritual death.

**v42.** *"Is this not Jesus . . ."* They know His lineage; He is a mortal being just like them. They are judging Him by preconceived prejudices rather than through the eyes of faith. They do not believe as Jesus, in His opening address to them, told them they must (verse 29).

**v43.** *"Do not murmur"* Jesus doesn't even bother to address their protests. Instead, He reiterates what He has just said to them.

**v44.** *"unless the Father who sent me draws him"* God's grace is necessary in order to have faith and understand (Is 54:13). Jer 31:33-34 has the same theme which accompanies the promise of the new covenant. *"I will raise him up on the last day"* Again, the promise of resurrection. This does not mean that all that is necessary is to "Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior" and you will be saved; salvation results not only from belief, but believing so deeply that you act on that belief and "Do whatever He tells you" (Jn 2:5).

**v45.** *"It is written"* Is 54:13 is what He quotes. Is 54 promises the future covenant which God will establish with His people when the messiah comes (see also Is 53:10-12; Jer 31:31-34).

**v46.** *"Not that any one has seen the Father"* Although the Old Testament sometimes represents God with a form, looked upon by creatures, the Jewish belief was firm: God was invisible and could not be seen by man. *"except him who is from God"* Jesus has seen the Father; He has come down from heaven (verse 38). Man can know God the Father only through the Son because He has seen Him and has come to reveal Him to us.

**v47.** *"Truly, truly"* See verse 26 comments. A life and death situation.

**v48.** *"I am the bread of life"* Jesus repeats this statement for the second time (verse 35) after repeating the oath; because the audience doubts Him. Having repeatedly identified Himself as one sent by God, Jesus now begins the second part of His discourse where He unveils the mystery of the Eucharist.

**v49.** *"Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died"* The manna sustained physical life but did not make them immortal, physically or spiritually. Their ancestors ate the manna but still made the golden calf.

**v50.** *"comes down from heaven"* It is a gift of God. *"eat"* In the first Passover meal (Ex 12:6-10) not only did you have to make the sacrifice and sprinkle its blood, you also had to eat it. *"not die"* If you do not eat the gift of God, you will die.

**v51.** *"I am the living bread"* The third time (verses 35 & 48) that He identifies Himself as the Bread of Life. In Hebrew numerology the number three represents completeness. Jesus does not attempt to soften or alter His teaching. It is the literal meaning, not a figurative or metaphorical one, that He is trying to drive home. *"the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh"* The Eucharistic theme has been reached; the mystery has been revealed (see also Heb 10:5-10).

**v52.** *"The Jews then disputed among themselves"* Many of the hearers have understood perfectly well what Jesus is saying and that He means exactly what He says, but they can't believe that what He says could be true. How can He give them His flesh to eat? Is He going to start carving up His arm? Others may have been confused by a Semitic figure of speech where to "eat someone's flesh" was to slander him (Ps 27:2). If they had understood Him in a metaphorical, figurative or symbolic sense, there would have been no reason for them to quarrel. Just as Nicodemus thought of being born again in the purely physical sense (Jn 3:4), and the woman at the well thought only of natural water (Jn 4:11), so now the Jews understand the reference to His flesh literally.

**v53.** *"Truly, truly"* See verse 26 comments. This is the fourth time He has reminded them that this is a life and death situation. *"flesh of the Son of man"* Recall that Son of Man is a term which Jesus applies to Himself, the New Adam (Dan 7:13), the One who will effect the resurrection (Ez 37). Jesus' words do not encourage any figurative understanding of His pronouncement, they only underscore the literal meaning. *"drink his blood"* If the idea of eating someone's flesh is repugnant, what about drinking their blood? To the Jewish audience this would be even more repulsive. Blood was a forbidden food under the Law (Lev 7:27; 17:10-14), the penalty for which was to be expelled from the tribe; they would be excommunicated. *"flesh and blood"* is a common Old Testament expression for life. When the two are separated, death results. By taking both, they must be partaking of a living being. *"no life in you"* Are dead, no spirit.

**v54.** *"eats my flesh"* The Greek verb used here is actually much stronger than just "eating" it literally means "chew", "gnaw". This shows that it is a real meal that He is talking about. There is now absolutely no room for saying that He is speaking symbolically. Not only has He reiterated the statement, He has strengthened it. *"eternal life"* A guarantee of life eternal. If He had been speaking symbolically, He would have been commanding them to slander Him or suffer the pain of eternal damnation. *"I will raise"* A pledge which only God can make.

**v55.** *"my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed"* If there had been any questions before, there is now no question at all that He is speaking quite literally.

**v56.** *"eats my flesh and drinks my blood"* Again the strong verb is used for eating. This is the fourth time, in four verses, that Jesus has said they must eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. The number four in Hebrew numerology stands for the world in its entirety (four winds, four cardinal

points of the compass). The Eucharist is God's gift to the whole world. With this rapid four verse repetition, it's almost like Jesus is saying "what part of 'eat' and 'drink' don't you understand?". God is not stupid; when hearers misunderstand Jesus, He corrects their misunderstanding immediately (see Jn 3:3-6 for example, where Jesus corrects Nicodemus' understanding of "born again" and explains that it is not a physical rebirth but a spiritual rebirth through baptism). Here, no correction is made because no misunderstanding exists. *"abides in me, and I in him"* This is covenant imagery. When people are bound by a common covenant, they are part of the same family. A person may be cast out of the tribe for drinking blood, but in doing so in this case they are made a member of the Body of Christ; an even bigger and more important family. By eating His body and drinking His blood, they are partaking in the family meal which binds them together. Jn 15:4 utilizes this same covenant imagery.

**v57.** *"living Father"* What kind of life does the Father have? A spiritual/immortal one; God is not mortal. *"I live because of the Father"* The Father and Son are one (Jn 14:10-11; 5:21-24); they share a life with the Holy Spirit (Jn 1:32; 15:26). They are a common union (communion). *"eats me will live because of me"* Will share His eternal life. The Christian shares a communion with Christ (1 Cor 10:16). How is this communion shared with Christ and the Christian community? The same way every family shares communion; by sharing a common meal--the Eucharist.

**v58.** *"bread which came from heaven"* This is the third time in this discourse (verses 31-32 and 49) that Jesus compares the true Bread of Life, His own Body, with the manna God used to feed the Israelites every day during their forty years of wandering. That bread was only a faint type of the Eucharist, the sacrament of life. It sustained them for forty years, this will sustain them through eternity.

**v60.** *"disciples"* Not just the Apostles, but many others as well. Recall that this group was described in Jn 6:22 as a crowd. This event is taking place very shortly after the feeding of the 5,000 (or 4,000 if you proceed to this point from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark) and many were attracted to Jesus. *"a hard saying"* Jesus has made many claims: He is the messiah, or at least a prophet -- but we know his family; He is the Bread of Life -- but He looks like a human; He gives eternal life -- but this is something only God can do; you must eat His Flesh -- this is cannibalism; you must drink His Blood -- this is forbidden by law; and to top it all off, He has said all this as a covenant oath (Amen, Amen)! *"who can listen to it?"* Break out the straight jacket, this guy's gone off the deep end! This sounds like the ravings of a mad man!

**v61.** *"Do you take offence at this?"* Do you think this is hard to believe?

**v62.** *"Then what if you were to see"* If you think that was hard, try this on for size! You haven't even heard the hardest part yet! Jesus doesn't make any attempt to go back and smooth things out; correct misunderstandings, because they don't misunderstand. They simply don't believe what they are hearing. Recall, back in verse 29 Jesus said "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." If you don't believe in Him, then you won't believe what He is saying. The role of the prophet, which is who some think He is, is to speak God's words. Some of the crowd don't believe and now He is going to make one final appeal; an appeal that will separate the wheat from the chaff, one final prophetic image. Some on the borderline will be convinced and the unbelievers are going to fall away. *"Son of man ascending"* Predicts His own ascension. To the Jewish listener this would most probably recall the assumption of Enoch (Gen 5:24), Elijah (2 Kg 2:11), or Moses who according to Hebrew tradition was taken to heaven by God after his death which is why his grave has never been found (Deut 34:6). Any one of these three instances would have called to mind a prophet; someone sent by God, someone who spoke God's words.

**v63.** *"It is the spirit that gives life"* It is the grace of God given by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that gives a spiritual life (2 Cor 3:6; 1 Cor 15:45-47; Jn 3:6). *"the flesh is of no avail"* A body without a Spirit is dead. Note that He doesn't say "my flesh" which is the subject of the Eucharistic

passage, but "the flesh" of Jn 3:6 and 8:15. Throughout this discourse they have been asking for food for their flesh and He has been offering spiritual food. *"the words"* "Believe in Him whom He has sent", "eat My Flesh", "drink My Blood". If you believe, then you will be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:3-8). If you eat and drink His Body and Blood, then you will receive everlasting life. Jesus is alive, His Flesh and Blood are not separate, both are present in the Eucharist. His Body and Blood can not be separated; He has ascended.

**v64.** *"there are some"* Jesus acknowledges their unbelief. He doesn't try a new approach to convince them. There is only one approach and understanding; either you believe it or you don't. Judas was one of the unbelievers.

**v65.** *"no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father"* See verse 44 comments. It is a free gift but you have to be open to receive it.

**v66.** *"many of the disciples drew back and no longer went with him"* Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of souls left; turned their backs on Jesus and eternal life. If Jesus had not been speaking literally, this was His last chance to correct their misunderstanding. Since He didn't, we have absolute assurance that their literal understanding is the correct one. This is the only incident recorded in Holy Scripture where anyone stops being a follower of Jesus for a reason of doctrine.

**v67.** *"Jesus said to the twelve"* Jesus addresses all the Apostles directly. *"Will you also go away?"* He doesn't say "They misunderstood me, go and bring them back so I can explain it to them". When He spoke in parables to the people, He explained everything to the Apostles in private (Mk 4:34). Here, He doesn't attempt to change His teaching or explain it further; even to His most intimate friends. Instead, He simply asks if they have so little faith that they will leave too.

**v68.** *"Simon Peter answered him"* Peter, chosen by Jesus to be the chief Apostle (Mt 16:19), acts as spokesman for the entire group. "to whom shall we go?" If we had a choice, we would leave too, but there is no other choice. We know you have come from God. You speak the words of God (Jn 3:34; 17:8). We don't fully understand your message, but we have enough faith in You because of He who sent You that we'll stay with You. *"You have the words of eternal life"* You have given us God's promise of eternal life. 'Eat My Flesh, drink My Blood', these actions truly give us eternal life.

**v69.** *"the Holy One of God"* This is not necessarily a messianic title. Prophets were also given this title; but He certainly was sent by God. Although the Apostles have not yet come to know Christ in all His fullness, they are on the way to this knowledge. They have not only seen Him, but realize that He has been sent by God and because of that they believe everything He has said; not fully understanding, but accepting it because of their faith in Him (verses 37 and 40).

**v70.** *"a devil"* Judas will be acting under diabolic influence (see Jn 13:2; Lk 22:3).