



Sunday Reflection

Ordinary Time

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 22 August 2021

Pentecost 13

Choosing to answer Christ's call to discipleship requires us to make some hard decisions, following a faith that demands total commitment in every aspect of our lives. But we don't do this alone; we walk alongside each other, upheld and encouraged by God's Spirit breathing through us.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"The one who eats this bread will live for ever." *John 6:58*

An Illustration to set the scene

Sent to Auschwitz in 1941, Polish Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe daily stood aside from the queue for meagre rations, ensuring that fellow prisoners received food.

Frequently there was nothing left for him.

In revenge for a prisoner's escape, the camp commandant decided to starve ten inmates to death.

When the fourth man, a sergeant, was picked he broke down, weeping that he would never see his wife and children again.

Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward to take his place. In the Anglican Communion we commemorate him on 14 August – you might have noticed him on the pewsheet.

The men were left to starve, locked up in an airless underground cell.

Every day, Fr Maximilian led them in prayers – several reports state that he celebrated the Eucharist daily – keeping hope burning in them.

After two weeks he was the only man left alive, and as the cell was required for new prisoners he was killed with a lethal injection of carbolic acid.

Returning home after the war, the sergeant, Franciszek Gajowniczek, discovered his wife alive although his sons had perished.

Travelling to Auschwitz annually on the anniversary of Kolbe's death, he eventually understood that he wasn't the cause of that death; rather, his saviour was a man whose profound understanding of Christ's call to follow him meant that he could have acted in no other way.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

This is the fifth and final week of Gospel readings exploring the “**bread of life**” sayings in John 6, flowing from the account that opens the chapter, of five thousand people being miraculously fed.

Today's text overlaps with last Sunday's, repeating Jesus' hard saying about the need to eat his flesh and drink his blood to be a true follower; words whose sense is only fully revealed in a post-crucifixion context.

Even then they imply a level of commitment that many find too overwhelming to accept.

Indeed, the fact that some disciples turn away at this point reminds us that, right from the beginning, there were different ideas about Jesus' identity among his followers and varying levels of faithfulness to him.

It is tempting to focus on the “*bread of life*” as a spiritual gift, nourishment for the inner person.

But, by reconnecting it with manna, *the bread from heaven that fed the Israelites in the desert*, Jesus reminds us that physical food is required for survival and that following him demands a positive decision with ethical and behavioural impact.

The Israelites grumbled and were lacklustre in response to God’s gift of manna.

Later Joshua, in our related first reading, still needed to confront them about their commitment to following God’s commandments as opposed to serving local idols.

Jesus offers similar options.

Yes, bread is necessary for survival, but a fulfilled life also requires the spiritual nourishment that is available through following God.

This is only truly effective by stripping away personal needs to focus upon the discipline of faith.

While Jesus must have been relieved at Peter’s response, “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life*”, in that it guaranteed him a core group of deeply committed disciples ready to spread the Gospel, he was nevertheless prepared to give the rest more freedom to make up their minds and react in their own time.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

As we reflect upon the readings this week we remember that Maximilian Kolbe believed in the light of the resurrection, but this light also starkly illuminates the uncompromising commitment of Jesus that led to his crucifixion.

As a priest accustomed to offering the spiritual bread of the Eucharist, believing it necessary for nourishing true wholeness, while also experiencing, through the brutal deprivations of Auschwitz, the primal need of food for survival, he understood deeply the vital link between soul and body, faith and sacrificial action.

When we downplay the totality of commitment that Christ requires of us, we sell the Gospel short.

At the same time, we need to remember that each person is at a different point on the continuum of faith, and that when Jesus instructed Peter to “*feed my sheep*” (John 21:17) he really did mean feed them, **body as well as soul.**

The spiritual importance of the “*bread of life*” is essential, but that does not give us an excuse to neglect the physical requirements of neighbours and strangers.

Churches that create, nurture and support sacrificial discipleship have truly grasped the meaning behind Christ’s words of eternal life.

How can we do that here in Johnstone & Renfrew as we emerge from the season of pandemic? How can we become “*Churches that create, nurture and support sacrificial discipleship have truly grasped the meaning behind Christ’s words of eternal life.*”

In silence let us consider our response for conversation over refreshments later.

“The one who eats this bread will live for ever.” John 6:58

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God’s spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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