

Today's readings begin with a two-fold prophecy. Isaiah is telling Israel that the Lord has freed them from the Babylonian exile and will help them rebuild their lives. This prophecy also foretells the coming of the messiah who will free all people from captivity to sin and death. There is one image in this prophecy I want to spend a little time with before going on to the other readings: the shepherd who feeds his flock. On the surface there is nothing shocking about that image because that is what shepherds do, they care for the animals entrusted to them. However, if we dig a little deeper, that image is earth shattering because our shepherd is also the lamb and he is going to feed us with his own body and blood.

Last weekend, I reminded you of the Bread of Life Discourse from John's gospel in which Jesus said: "I am the bread of life. My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have life within them." We know Jesus is the greatest of all shepherds; in the bread of life discourse he identifies himself as also being the sacrificial lamb who is going to feed us with his body and blood. Eating Jesus' flesh and blood isn't just an invitation, it is also a commandment. In this teaching he also said, "whoever does not eat my flesh nor drink my blood does not have life within them." This is earth shattering and it caused many of his disciples to turn away.

The bread of life discourse is critical to our understanding of the Eucharist...but it's incomplete. It proposes more questions than it answers. How can Jesus command us to eat his flesh and blood? That sounds like cannibalism which was prohibited under Jewish law and is still abhorrent to us today. Even if there was a way to do this without breaking legal and cultural taboos, how would it be possible for us, today, to eat his flesh and blood when we are here on earth and he is in heaven?

It was these types of questions that caused so many of Jesus' followers to turn away from him and go back to their old lives. After that happened, what did Jesus do? He did not back down or soften his words. He let them walk away and then He turned to the Twelve and asked, "Do you also want to leave?" Peter said "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." Speaking on behalf of the other Apostles, Peter expressed their belief in Jesus and his teachings. Did they understand? As faithful Jews, they were probably equally as shocked by Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as those who turned away. The difference was that while they might not have understood, they were willing to trust that eventually Jesus would help them understand.

What is needed to complete the bread of life discourse? The Last Supper.

We know what Jesus said at the Last Supper because we hear his words repeated in every Mass during the consecration of the bread and wine. On the night of the Last Supper, when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, blessed and broke it and said “This is my body, eat it” and then did the same thing with the wine, perhaps the Apostles made the connection to that hard teaching back in Capernaum. They understood that this was how they were going to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood: through Jesus’ divine words the inner reality—the substance—of the bread and wine was going to be transformed into his body and blood. This continues into the present day whenever the Mass is celebrated...but in order to (maybe) understand that, we have to understand the connection between the Last Supper and the Cross on Calvary. But in order to understand that connection, we have to go way back and discover where the roots of the cross are hidden in the Old Testament. I’m going to attempt to do that next week. Right now let’s take a quick look at the rest of today’s readings.

The gospel is the beginning of the fulfillment of the messianic understanding of Isaiah’s prophecy. John the Baptist has come ahead of Jesus to clear his path by telling everyone to repent of their sins. John the Baptist and Isaiah both want all people to get rid of any obstacles that slow down the coming of the Lord. In the second reading, Saint Peter addresses what is perceived as a delay in the Lord’s planned arrival. Many expected Jesus to return in glory immediately. That did not happen. Peter tells us that instead of thinking of this as a delay, we should think of it as God being patient and merciful. God wants all people to be with him and he is giving us time to convert and repent so that we can be with him. But this grace period won’t last forever. Time is going to run out and Jesus is going to return and judge all people according to their faith and deeds. We don’t know when that will happen so get prepared now.

The first half of Advent focuses on this long-awaited but very sudden return of Jesus at the end of time. Being prepared for that arrival of Jesus helps us to prepare for Jesus’ coming to us in the Eucharist. If we are ready to meet him at the end of time, we will be ready to receive him in the Eucharist. Being prepared in this way means that we have examined our consciences, realized where we have sinned and asked God to forgive us. Less serious sins can be absolved through the act of contrition at the beginning of Mass. Grave sin must be forgiven through sacramental contrition. This is the teaching of the Church. Each one of us is responsible for forming and examining our own consciences and knowing the states of our souls. There are—and have been for years—guides to

confession in the racks in the breezeway. There is also a link to examinations of conscience on the website in the area where confession times are listed. Take advantage of those resources.

The Lord is coming. Are you prepared to meet him?