



Big Question Radical Answer
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 22, 2021)

Big decisions require courageous answers: Marrying the right person? Starting pain medication with the risk of addiction? Leaving the company and starting one's own business? Stopping cancer treatment and letting nature take its course? Or, in this covid time, deciding who will be hooked up to a ventilator and who will be left untreated? Yet, this kind of life decisions, important as they are, they are still accompanied by the promise of the presence of God. In fact, in the prophet Isaiah God promised, "Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'"¹ Whatever decision we arrive at, hopefully in prayer and spiritual discipline, God is there. When we live and move in the awareness of belonging to God, we respond with love, care, and compassion. We can't live outside of God and yet at times we behave as we did.

For quite a few Sundays, we have been reflecting on Jesus' message on the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. His message, captured in ch. 6 of the gospel of John, is both long and clear for those who want to enter eternal life. In fact, his message and interaction with the crowd spans over 71 verses, by far the longest chapter in the gospel. The discourse on consuming the Bread of Life becomes increasingly urgent and Jesus faces some push back from those who recall the miraculous story embedded in Jewish memory of how one thousand years earlier Yahweh had saved the people in the desert with manna from heaven. Jesus is trying to tell them that they have something, someone better than manna before their very eyes.

Towards the end, however, Jesus acknowledges that some disciples (aka followers of Jesus) have a hard time with what he has said, so he doubles down: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." He clarifies that they can hear him only if drawn by the Father, that is, if they approach it from a spiritual angle. Jesus has been

¹ Isaiah 30:20-21



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advising all along that people need to open to a life from above if they desire to have joy and fulness of life.

But again, Jesus gives no blissful, ethereal discourse. "Believing" and "knowing" means that you must participate in his cruel crucifixion. The trust we show in the words of Jesus has a totally earthly and fleshy implication, not based on platitudes but on concrete, every-day messy living: Being with Jesus means that you are on the side of the crucified - the most shameful and humiliating place to be. Are you willing to stay there when people abuse you, vilify you, and say all sorts of lies and mischaracterizations about you? This is a difficult thing to accept. Being willing to go that low is quite impossible, unless empowered by the Spirit.

“⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” Once again, Jesus loses some followers. Will this passive aggressive behavior make any difference in the kind of message Jesus will give from then on? Will he tone it down to maintain together one happy camp? He is surely saddened by the people’s response. How much must he have wanted people to get it? No matter how long he stayed on the subject and tried to explain it, people just didn’t get it or maybe they got it all too well and turned their back to him.

Apparently, it was too hard to accept and required a radical decision, radical in terms of going to the roots of one’s belief, the roots of one’s mind set and psychology, the roots of one’s assumed identity and entrenched world view with all the biased behavior that that produces. Jesus wants us to replace all that with a new vision of what God has in mind for the world and commit to it. That is no small gig. It requires death and resurrection. It requires a baptism of fire in the water and the Spirit. It expects a decisive commitment to flee the slavery of Egypt and cross through parted waters after the new Moses. It requires a renunciation of the old ways, the old Adam, to embrace the new ways of the new Adam, Jesus Christ.

Peter confesses on behalf of a few intimate followers: ““Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” That is a remarkably faith-filled response to Jesus’ wondering: “Do you also wish to go away?”



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I wonder what must have gone through Jesus' mind as he asked that question to his disciples? Was he afraid of being abandoned? If Peter affirmed, "Yes, we are outta here" was he ready for the loneliness? For the disappointment of so much love shared with them in vain? For the disillusionment of the time invested in their spiritual growth with no results to show? For the embarrassment of turning out to be a leader not worth listening to and following?

I know that Jesus has asked me that question many times and keeps on asking it. When I am not able to shake off disappointment; when I feel helpless and scared; when I feel discouraged and tempted to become cynical and wonder if a Christian life is really doable and worth the sacrifice, Jesus asks me again: "Do you also wish to go away?"

But then I end up answering as Peter did: "Where am I going to go? You alone make sense; only life with you and for you is true life." How close sometimes I come to follow in Judas' footsteps, giving up on trust in Jesus' way. How necessary a life in the Spirit is for us to carry on.

In fact, how easy it is for us to lose our way. Cerebral knowledge of the ways of God is not sufficient – the devil knew the Bible and tried to sway Jesus from a life of faithful service! The support of a community, though important for growth and accountability is not sufficient – Judas lived in community, had intimate fellowship with the rest of the disciples and they trusted him with their money giving him the important role of treasurer. Sharing intimate moments with Jesus where Jesus spills out his gut and gives us his flesh to eat and blood to drink is not sufficient – again, Judas was present at the Last Supper and we can easily go through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion at our own convenience, mindlessly and as a death insurance transaction.

Only a life in the Spirit can make the Word come alive. It's the Spirit that turns a group of sinners into saints; stony hearts into hearts of flesh; bread and wine into Jesus' flesh and blood. A life in the Spirit nudges us to give up childish things and become mature in Christ. It's in the Spirit that we, though many and with varied backgrounds and life experiences, become one in the Lord.



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What a journey! How much surrendering are we required to do? Quite a bit and ongoing. Sometimes, Jesus brings me kicking and screaming to a new place in my relationship with him. In fact, not always I want to be forgiving or loving or understanding. Not always I want to take my part of responsibility in a conflict. Not always I want to make the extra mile and show generosity or a cheerful spirit. It does not happen always that I want to welcome the stranger or, worse, my enemy into my space.

That's when a life in the Spirit helps. That's when I need to lean on the power of faith and trust the words of Jesus. On my own I cannot go very far but when I put on the armor of faith I have protection and endurance, I am filled with new hope and renewed strength. I must confess that I don't like the militaristic language that Paul uses in his letter to the Ephesians. War is about enemies trying to destroy each other causing much collateral damage to civilians, farm animals, and surrounding habitats. In war nobody wins.

I have a hard time with God's calls for bloodshed and all the prayers in the Bible requesting vengeance and the destruction of Israel's enemies. Granted, Paul is talking about spiritual warfare but I feel sadness and grief at encountering metaphors that encourage a posture of wartime readiness.

But maybe, to think of God as a Warrior (in the Hebrew Scriptures one of the names for God is Sabaoth, God of hosts or armies)² and of Jesus as the Lion of Judah³ needs to be explained.

Stories of Christians protecting Mosques on Friday and vice-versa Muslims creating a human shield around Christian churches on Sunday are not uncommon.⁴ This kind of militancy along with all other acts of courage and valor protecting the vulnerable are praiseworthy. When God shows up in the midst of these battles, God looks less like a warrior equipped to fight and more like the Muslims and the Christians who put their bodies on the line to protect other children of Abraham. Perhaps, the prayer to the Warrior God

² It appears primarily in the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, as well as many times in the Psalms.

³ Revelation 5:5

⁴ [Horrorified by deadly attacks, French Muslims protect church | Crux Now](#); [Pakistani Muslims Form Human Chain To Protect Christians During Mass \(PHOTOS\) | HuffPost](#); [Christians Protect Mosques on Fri., Muslims Guard Churches on Sunday - Good News Network](#)



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must be for the strength to employ spiritual fortitude to right wrongs with non-violent resistance.

The strength we need is to withstand psychological pressure and emotional abuse and, who knows, in some cases we may even be called to put our body on the line for love of neighbor.

May the armor of God be our love for neighbor and our commitment to peace.