
LOOKING FOR GOD

Aren't there moments when you want to say what many of JESUS' disciples said: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

- As I said last week, sometimes it is easier to identify with the crowds who misunderstand and question JESUS than with JESUS HIMSELF.
 - Because what JESUS has been saying, and what we have heard these past four weeks, is indeed hard to listen to and hard to understand:
 - That JESUS is the BREAD OF LIFE?
 - That HE provides the only food that truly nourishes?
 - That HE gives us HIS own self, even HIS own flesh and blood, to sustain us on our journey in life.
 - These are hard words, hard to hear, hard to comprehend, hard to believe.
 - It's no wonder then, that many of those following after JESUS now desert HIM.

But at this point, we should be careful, as it is too easy to write off those who give up on JESUS as people too lazy or unfaithful to believe.

- Note, though, that John calls these folks, not simply "the crowds," as in earlier passages, but rather "disciples."
 - "...many of HIS disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'"
- The people in today's reading who now are leaving JESUS, are precisely those who had, in fact, believed in JESUS,
 - those who had followed HIM and who had given up much to do so.
- But now, finally, after all their waiting and watching and wondering and worrying, they have grown tired
 - and they can no longer see clearly what it was about JESUS that attracted them to HIM in the first place.
 - And so they leave.

Who can blame them?

- More to the point, are we really all that different?
- I mean, who here has not at one time or another wondered whether you have believed in vain?
 - During the dark of the night, perhaps watching and praying by the bedside of a loved one in the hospital, wondering why she or he is so sick?
 - Or in the early part of the morning, maybe, waking up alone and wondering why your spouse is gone?
 - Or in the latter part of the afternoon, perhaps, while cooking supper and thinking about your family—so fully of ill-will toward each other—and wondering why things have not turned out the way you hoped they would and whether they ever will?

At these times—and if we're honest, we must admit that there are so many of them in this life—at times like these when we're looking for GOD, for some sense that there is a GOD, and having such a hard time seeing GOD,

- that we are tempted to conclude that the promises we trusted were empty and the faith we once held was misplaced.

- Oh, perhaps we don't renounce or desert the LORD openly.
 - We just don't make the extra effort to get to church regularly,
 - or we reduce what we've been giving,
 - or are more reluctantly to help others,
 - or simply stop praying until, in the end, we end up just like these disciples in today's reading.

And so, I'd wager that the picture John draws for us in this Gospel passage may not be a pretty one, but it is a rather realistic one.

- In other words, this is a fairly accurate portrait of disbelief, with JESUS surrounded by folks who wanted to believe, who used to believe, who have been trying to believe,
 - but have gone through the motions for too long and have finally given up.

At the same time, though, John's picture is also one of belief, of courage, and of faith.

- After "*many disciples turned back and no longer followed HIM,*" John tells us that JESUS turned to the twelve and asked, "*You do not want to leave too, do you?*"
 - And Simon Peter answers, "*LORD, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life.*"

I've often wondered, where do Peter and the others get their faith?

- In other words, what makes them different from all those who gave up on JESUS and went away?

Now, in asking this question we must again be careful.

- Because, as easy as it is to write off those disciples who turn away as foolish or faithless, it's even easier to imagine Peter and the rest as flawless faith giants.
- And this, as each of the four Gospel writers remind us, was simply not the case.
 - The twelve were also plagued by doubt and fear.
 - They suffered at times from an overabundance of pride and a lack of courage,
 - and they, too, eventually deserted JESUS, and at the very time HE needed them most.

So, if they aren't smarter, or more faithful, or more courageous, or, in short, any better than the rest of JESUS' disciples—then or now—then what is it that sets them apart?

- I think the answer is one thing.
- Listen again to Peter: "*LORD, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life.*"
 - Peter, you see, knew where to look.
 - That's it.
 - That's what makes him and the others different.
 - It's not their brains or their ability or their status or even their faith: they simply know where to look.

And once again we find ourselves all of a sudden right back in the middle of our discussion about the sacraments and the significance they hold for our life together.

- For as JESUS' real presence in our world, the sacraments are the one place we may look and know for sure that we will find GOD in CHRIST there for us.

Now here I want to be most clear.

- This is not to say that GOD is not at work in other places in the world.
 - Certainly, as believing Christians we confess that this world simply pulses with the presence and activity of the CREATOR:
 - in nature, of course, but also in government, and family,
 - in the work you do and the benefits you receive from the work of others,
 - in our gathering together as family and as a family of faith.
 - In all these places and more, GOD continues to be both present and active, creating and sustaining the whole creation.

And yet, each of us knows just how difficult at times it can be to see GOD in these places.

- When nature turns violent or the government goes corrupt,
 - when the family is a place of discord and the church one of division,
 - when all the things we usually count on come up empty and we no longer know where to turn,
 - then we may hear the sacraments calling us back to see GOD clearly at work for us through water, bread, and wine,
 - combined with GOD's mighty word of forgiveness, acceptance, and life.

You see, here's the thing: although GOD's Word is most surely a part and central to the liturgy and the hymns, the prayers and the preaching,

- yet even in these important elements of our shared worship, it may sometimes be hidden and hard to hear.
 - But in Baptism and the LORD's Supper, GOD has bound GOD's own self to the Word and through the Word to the simple, common, and ordinary elements of water, bread, and wine—
 - the very stuff of everyday life, so that we who are simple, common, ordinary, and everyday people may receive GOD with confidence.

This is why we come to the font and the table.

- This is why we seek the things to which GOD has bound GODSELF.
 - And in doing so, we bind ourselves to GOD's own self and receive all that GOD has promised.

So, while there are times when we may struggle to feel GOD's presence,

- to see GOD in the midst of our struggles,
- to find the courage and the confidence to continue on our own, we come.
 - LORD, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life. We come to YOU in our doubt, but trusting in YOUR promises.
 - Take us to YOURSELF. Hold us in YOUR grace. And love us now and forever.