

# 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Year

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Today we hear the conclusion of Our Lord's explanation discourse on the Bread of Life. He has spoken about how he will give them his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. It is spiritual food and drink – essential to sustain us on our journey through this life and for that final step into the 'unknown' at death. It is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet – a sign of our intimate union with God. Many of those listening to him cannot take it in. What he is suggesting seems impossible or at least distasteful and obnoxious. Our Lord does not offer them a solution to the problem. Their approach is too limited – tied to this material world. "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." They lack the openness required to enter into this mysterious relationship where love will enlighten the heart. The Twelve recognise their limitations. They do not understand but they hold on to what is most important – their relationship with Jesus. "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe, we know that you are the Holy One of God."

St Paul often uses the word 'mystery' to describe our relationship with Christ and God's ultimate purpose for us. The Eucharist is the time and place where above all we encounter the mystery of Christ. We may come with questions or doubts, but we come because there is no one else to go to who can bring us the message of eternal life. The very word 'Eucharist' means 'thanksgiving' and as we give thanks to the Father, Christ the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit transforms bread and wine into the Bread of Life, his own flesh and blood. He comes into our midst veiled by the outward signs of bread and wine. He comes to dwell within us sacramentally when we receive Communion and brings us the hope of glory. It is a closeness and intimacy to which the love of man and woman in marriage point and a foretaste of our union with God eternally in heaven. This human love can be expressed and its practical implications described, but it cannot be dissected and analysed without taking away its heart.

Christ's presence in the Eucharist is real and objective but we can enter into the mystery only with hearts open in faith and love. Just as the love between man and woman in marriage is expressed and made real not by gestures alone but by a commitment shown in the little decisions and actions of everyday so too our faith in Christ and his living presence in our midst cannot simply be an intellectual assent. In fact we cannot really encompass at an intellectual level how Our Lord transforms bread and wine into his body and blood or how the King of the Universe can be present under the outward signs of small piece of bread or come into the hearts of so many people at the same time. There is only one Christ who comes to each one of us. We cannot take it in and we must simply take it on faith as the disciples did. "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life".

What we can do is express our faith and love in a practical way. Our very choice to come to Mass is itself an act of commitment however limited. We profess our own faith in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament not only in words but also in gesture. We kneel in adoration, not simply for prayer, before the King of Kings. We greet him with a genuflection when we come before the tabernacle, especially but not only when we enter and leave the Church. At the consecration of the Mass the priest holds up the Body of the Lord and his Precious Blood in the chalice for us to behold with loving eyes and to adore. Long before the introduction of the acclamation at this point it was the custom for us to say the words of St. Thomas, "My Lord and my God"! When we approach the altar to receive Holy Communion we should make a conscious act of faith and love. If we are not kneeling and space permits it is praiseworthy to express this outwardly by a sign such as genuflection or bow. After receiving Our Lord we should spend a few moments in thanksgiving enjoying this wonderful and intimate presence and if circumstances permit extend this by a time of private prayer after Mass. If the church is open and accessible we may have the opportunity for a private time with the Lord present in the tabernacle. This is enhanced when there is a time of Exposition because we can see the Lord with our bodily eyes and receive his blessing at Benediction. It is a foretaste of our life with God in eternity. "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."