

**Reflection on the Gospel-21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:60-69)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

‘To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’

If we have trouble understanding and coming to terms with some of the teachings of Jesus in the gospel, then we can take some comfort from the reaction of the disciples in today’s gospel. It seems that it was not only the members of the Jewish synagogue who were offended by his teaching, but also those who had accepted Jesus as Messiah or Christ and had joined the community of believers.

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” they complain. Once more, Jesus’ response introduces new teaching, teaching that can only raise more questions in their minds. He links “spirit” with “life”. Having used the term “flesh” of his body and of the life that he offers to those who eat of his flesh, he now introduces an element of doubt: flesh is now “useless”! It is typical of John to use the same word in a variety of ways. Here “flesh” is used negatively and metaphorically to refer to human weakness and sinfulness in contrast with “spirit” which evokes the creative spirit of God that moved over the waters at creation and the spirit that informed the word of the prophets.

The Johannine Jesus lays the ground for offering progressively deeper insights into his identity and destiny and into the meaning of the Christian life as the gospel narrative unfolds. The reference to his ascending recalls the earlier part to the gospel where Jesus is presented as the pre-existent one, the one who comes from God and has already ascended to God (John 3:13). Once again, we are confronted with an ancient cosmology that places God in the heavens above. After his death, Jesus will tell Mary Magdalene that he has not yet ascended and instructs her to tell the disciples that he is ascending to God (20:17). It seems that John wants to keep emphasising the origins of Jesus as the eternal Word and Wisdom of God.

There are many disciples who refuse to grapple with the complexities and implications of this teaching and they turn away. Jesus asks his closest followers if they too will desert. Peter speaks for himself and his companions when he declares their undying allegiance: *“To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* Eternal life is the Johannine equivalent of the “kingdom of God” or “of the heavens” of the other gospels. Most of us have wanted to abandon our commitment at some time or another. Peter’s declaration is a sobering one for us in times of doubt and an encouragement for those of us who seek to understand more deeply and to keep believing despite the challenges.