

**Reflection on the Gospel-19th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:41-51)**

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Jesus was a Jew, as was John, the author of the gospel. It may seem strange, therefore, that John has the “Jews” complaining about Jesus. It is indeed strange, and it has caused many a reader to wonder. John seems to use the designation “Jew” as a code word for the opponents of Jesus. These opponents are almost exclusively Jewish leaders rather than the ordinary people who followed Jesus. The designation does not include all the Jewish leaders of course: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea stand out as leaders who came to believe in Jesus as the Christ and to take risks on account of their faith.

The complaint of the “Jews” relates to Jesus’ claim, “I am the bread that came down from heaven”. Jesus shares the world view or cosmology of his contemporaries: God is in the heavens above, so that anything or anyone coming from God in that view comes *down from heaven*. The problem for his adversaries is that Jesus is one of them: they know his father Joseph and his grandparents, so how can he be making such a claim? They make the mistake of thinking that is all there is to know about his origins. “Don’t complain” is Jesus’ response to them. He proceeds to tell them that there are dimensions of his being of which they know nothing. Yet they need to know, as do we. It is God who draws us to Jesus. Like the opponents of Jesus, we need to listen and to learn, to be taught by God. We need bread in order to live and we also need the bread of God’s teaching.

Jesus makes a future promise: the bread he offers is different from the bread the Israelites ate in the desert, in that those who eat of it will live forever. Furthermore, the bread that he will give for the life of the world is his flesh. This leads to further misunderstanding and the opportunity for Jesus to teach at another level. The eucharistic overtones in today’s reading are subtle but nonetheless present, as they were in the feeding story.

John is writing some seventy years after the death of Jesus for communities that gathered every week for the breaking of the bread-in memory of him and of all that he enacted. Like the early Christians, we reflect on the meaning of eucharist. We recognise and honour the materiality of the bread and of the flesh that Jesus shares with all living creatures. At the same time we are invited to reflect on the symbolic or metaphorical resonances of both bread and flesh in the context of the claims of the Johannine Jesus. The question for us then becomes: “How do we live into this extraordinary mystery as we face the demands of our endangered planet?”