All the good works in the world are not equal to the Holy Eucharist because they are the works of men; but the Mass is the work of God. Martyrdom is nothing in comparison for it is but the sacrifice of man to God; but the Mas is the sacrifice of God for man. ***John Vianney***

August 25th **The Shofar** *Bread of life*

The Bread of Life is what it claims to be

Paul wrote to Timothy and in that letter he declared *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* God alone knows the full extent of the suffering Paul undertook on account of his mission to preach the Good News to the very ends of the earth. Out of all of the New Testament characters, it is Paul who had the most reasons for giving up, for *turning away from Jesus* and going home. But he stood firm.

Of course, apostasy was a major threat facing the nascent Church as Christians sought to live the Gospel amidst threatening environments. It turned out to be much easier to walk away from Jesus than risk imprisonment, exile or an horrendous death.

This explains John's use of the verb *to persevere* in the Book of Revelation. Christians there are exhorted to persevere in faithfulness. In the face of such vicious and unrelenting persecution, it is truly a sign of the power of divine grace that the Church not only managed to survive during this period but she also grew and spread rapidly.

Persevering is not simply a matter of "hanging in there" until the bad times are over. It is not about keeping our heads down lest we attract even more criticism and so wonder about our ability to cope. Persevering is a positive action – *being faithful* during the harshest of times. That is the key word – faithfulness.

This is exactly what Paul meant when he wrote his second letter to Timothy. He could claim, quite rightly that God grace and power in him made all the difference. Paul was a weak and fragile human being seeking to proclaim Christ – and Him crucified – to communities made up of equally weak and fragile human beings. He boasts, not about himself and his powers. He boasts about what the Risen and Glorious Christ continues to do in and through the faithful disciples of their Lord and Saviour. So much of the New Testament is about finding light in the midst of the darknesses that come our way and that can only be true through preserving through all challenges.

Some disciples turned away and left him

What a moment in the Gospel! We have large crowds following after Jesus into the vast wilderness and alongside of them we have the Apostles and an unknown number of what John calls ":disciples" The crowd are enthusiastic and appear to be keen to make Jesus their king. This is because of his miracle of feeding the five thousand with bread and fish along with the many other miracles they had seen or heard about.

But Jesus' mission from the Father is about bringing salvation to all through the sacrificial life and death of the Son of God. He set about transforming the world one heart at a time.

His message in this chapter is an invitation to *abide in me*. This is what eating his body and drinking his blood achieves for those men and women of faith who come to him.

This is a fulfilling of the prophesy of Jeremiah 31:31 where God, through the prophet gives hope to the Hebrew people getting ready to head off into exile. *Behold the days are coming* is God's way of encouraging the people to look beyond their present disasters and know that there is a day coming and that day will transform them and the world in which they find themselves living.

This is the message of hope. The faithful are urged to persevere in faithfulness knowing that the deeds of the Babylonians are not the final word on reality. Their exile is but one tiny fraction of human history, and they know the great saving works of God in the past. They know they are God's chosen people and that even though they are sinners; even though they have turned to

other gods for help and support, God has never abandoned them. Here is the key point Ezekiel makes so well – God is also going with them to Babylon. They are never out of his sight and once their allotted time of punishment is over, they will return to the land of milk and honey given to their ancestors.

When *that day comes* the Jewish people will have the Law of God *written in their hearts.* It has proved to be clear that they are unable to keep laws written on tablets of stone. They can keep the actual words of the Law while at the same time they are placing their hope and their happiness on other things. They might not be technically breaking any of the Laws given to them on Mt Sinai but they remain far from the shelter of the Great Shepherd of Israel.

Not so in ethe future. *In those days* love of the people for God, and God's love for them will be written in their hearts. That is biblical language for having God at the very centre of their identity as people and believers. The heart is where all decision making takes place. It is the home for God, our engine room providing us with all we need to persevere in faithfulness. It is inside of us, a part of our spiritual DNA and we remain unwilling to act in any other way than the way God calls us to be living. We choose God and that choice guides, directs and governs all we do, all we think and all we say.

It is about us choosing Jesus

The sad part about today's Gospel is the way some of the disciples of Jesus (not the apostles) found his teaching too difficult for them. It demanded a faithfulness to something they struggled to understand, something appearing to be contrary to all they knew about God.

They had to *eat my body* and *drink of my blood* for it is only then that they will have life. They should know that Jesus providing them with bread and fish in the wilderness was not going to feed them forever. They will be hungry again, just as the Jews in the time of the Exodus were hungry after eating the manna. The physical foods this world offers may dull the feelings of hunger for a time, but they will be hungry again. Not so with the Bread Jesus is offering, the Bread which is his own body. It is Bread for eternal life.

That is what made some disciples turn away. Even though they had seen and experienced his many miracles and acts of power, they could not trust him, rely on him to do what was best for them. If they could not understand the teaching; if they could not work out what difference it would make to their lives; if it seemed to be asking too much, then they would walk away.

This is a repeat of the actions of the Jewish people in the wilderness. The success of their journey depended on an absolute, unwavering trust in God. Sadly, they always wanted a backup just in case things did not work out. The disciples though, just turned around and gave up on the abundant promises made to them by Jesus. There turned out to be a limit to what they were prepared to do in following Jesus and they had now reached that invisible line in the sand.

Jesus was offering them his very body and his very blood, promising to *abide* in them in ways they will never fully understand. This was not Jesus talking in metaphorical language. They would not have left if they understood it to be metaphors. No. They were to partake in the mystery of faith and eat his body and drink his blood. Yes, it was then and it remains so today, how the bread and wine truly, fully and actually become flesh to eat and blood to consume.

This is the gift of Holy Communion, the Eucharist in which we are redeemed by the once only, the unrepeatable death of Jesus on the cross. We share his life and the life of the Blessed Trinity. It matters not how this happens, just that Jesus said it was and in faith and in trust we believe him.

In so many of our faith communities we find people emulating those disciples and walking away from the faith community that is the Body of Christ, the Church. They turn away for all kinds of personal reasons, most of them about their own pride, their own unwillingness to take into their hearts the teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount.