

Sunday August 22, 2021
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Parishioner Reflection

By: Kerry Tucker

I. Crossroads

In Terrence Malick's recent film, *A Hidden Life* (2019), Franz Jagerstatter, a devout Christian, refuses to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler that was required for military service in the Austrian army during the Nazi regime. Based on real events, Jagerstatter's decision is a costly one for him and his family. Because of it he is ultimately guillotined by the Nazis.

One theme the movie constantly returns to is Franz' "hiddenness" or obscurity, as a small village farmer, and whether this means his sacrifice will make any difference in the world. Do our choices at life's crossroads as Christians, whoever we are, matter? Today's Gospel reading may help to answer this question.

II. "So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you (Natalia Kononenko, ed., *Living with Christ Sunday Missal 2020-2021*, Novalis, 2020, p. 496)".

Jesus is directing this remark, firstly, toward a "large crowd" who had followed him and the disciples across the Sea of Galilee to the synagogue in Capernaum (John 6:59, NRSV). And what Jesus is saying is a response to the question they were debating among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6: 52, NRSV). The mob is not made up of Jesus' disciples. This seems evident partly because the Scripture refers here to "the disciples" as a separate group from that of the mob (John 6: 60, 66). It is on this distinct group, Jesus' disciples, rather than the large crowd, that today's Gospel reading focuses.

III. "Jesus...said to them 'Does this offend you?' (John 6:61, NRSV)

Rather surprisingly perhaps, the disciples' response to Jesus' remark, based on the Gospel reading, seems to be viewed more critically than the reaction of the mob, which is neither commended nor criticized. The Gospel says that "many of [Jesus'] disciples" upon hearing of his comment respond to it with a question of their own. A number of them say, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it" (John 6:60, NRSV)? It describes their response as one of "complaining". And includes Jesus' question in reply to theirs, "Does this offend you" (Kononenko, p. 496)? This shows their discontent was evident to him.

Were these disciples wrong to be “offend[ed]”? Perhaps not, Jesus’ statement taken strictly literally and without context (John 6: 54-59, NRSV), as the large crowd and his disciples may have done, does on the face of it sound like he is advocating cannibalism. A behaviour that up to today, 2000 years later, is considered a repulsive act.

However, Jesus, in the case of his followers, seems to have little patience with their reaction to his homily. For instance, he says to them later in the reading that, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless” (John 6:63a, NRSV). His use of hyperbole here may indicate some impatience. And, it might, also, indicate that he is trying to make this point very clear. He says further that, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63b, NRSV). He seems here to deny that he has been speaking in merely human or natural terms, but rather in spiritual or supernatural ones. He next implies that grasping this depends on one’s belief in him. And that this is something that is a gift of God and may not exist among his followers, not even among his apostles (John 6: 70). This reality is demonstrated immediately by the fact that after Jesus’ words here, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66, NRSV) and later by Judas Iscariot’s betrayal (John 6:71, NRSV).

IV. “And Joshua said to all the people “If you are unwilling to serve the Lord choose this day whom you will serve...” (Joshua 24:15, NRSV).

The important point in the Gospel reading for followers of Jesus today and one that, also, is made in today’s 1st Reading, is perhaps that faith is a blessing from God that will be tested by crossroads that require the people of God, that is, the Church and/or its individual members to make choices, like Franz Jagerstatter, that show the reality of their faith in God or lack thereof. Like Jesus’ disciples in the Gospel reading, the people of Israel, who are about to begin to enjoy without opposition the blessings of Canaan for the first time, are given a choice by Joshua as to whether they will serve the God of Israel or other gods. Despite their protestations to the contrary, the Israelites already have “foreign gods among them” ((Josh. 24: 23a, NRSV), that is, images of foreign deities. And Joshua tells them that they will not be able to follow the Lord (Josh. 24: 19-20, NRSV). Israel’s temporal hope may have been that Joshua and his family chose to follow Israel’s God. “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15b, NRSV). The first Israelite settlers in the promised land will at least have an example of people who serve God in their midst. However, in Jesus, God’s people have been given so much more. We, in him, have been given, as Peter says in today’s Gospel, “the words of eternal life” and “the Holy One of God” (John 6: 68-69, NRSV). It is our choice whether we, like the apostles, “come to believe and know” him (John 6: 69). And by our actions, even when being tested, prove that belief.