

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Choice Is Yours!

What choice do I have? “To be, or not to be...” Hamlet, meditating on suicide, makes one of the great phrases. He puts very dramatically a choice few of us would wish to face; when someone is seriously contemplating “ending it all”, they must be in a degree of pain heavier and more authoritative than our accustomed instinct to live. This instinct is very powerful: it’s impossible, for instance, simply to stop breathing. But it’s not impossible to stop eating, and I have known people who’ve done this - how deliberately, we shall never know - and so slipped away. Which brings us into context for today’s Gospel. Jesus offers a kind of feeding which will “endure to eternal life” for those who will accept him as their bread. His seriousness is, I think, unique in the Gospel - it’s a life-or-death issue: *the words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life*. The choice he offers his hearers - and so us - is a basic one: to accept faith in him, and live: or to refuse our trust, and die.

The Great Choice

People who have been brought up on the “comparative religion” system ought to find this language challenging. When a teacher, who may have any religion, or none, leads youngsters through a series of studies of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, and any number of others, it is held that religious education has taken place. I think it depends on what you call religious education. It might as well be called a course in historical sociology. I could get someone who totally lacks appreciation of poetry through A-level English Lit; but I would scarcely have *educated* him until he could enter his dreams with Yeats or find himself gutted by *King Lear*. So in religious matters, no-one is “religiously educated” until he makes a commitment of his whole life: *to believe or not to believe*, that is the question! Now, you may say that finding such total commitment is out of fashion, not part of the spirit of the times: we speak about “the ages of faith” as if believing came much easier five hundred years ago. I don’t think it did. It may have been easier to *evade* religious questions, when everyone was involved in gilding the crockets on the fiftieth local spire and putting up secondary (stained?) double-glazing against the noise of bells. But I’m not talking about *conforming* to the prevailing religious current

of the day, and neither is today’s Gospel. I’d say that faith for the Jewish listeners in Capernaum, and even for Peter and the other disciples, was much more like the decision *we* have to make about Jesus in the twentieth century: a huge, challenging demand.

What About You?

Jesus is prepared to risk everything in this crisis. The majority of the crowd is stopping its ears, incapable of accepting what he says: *I have come down from heaven to give life to the world* is the language of the grandly deluded, the deranged; it is also the language of blasphemy. *Intolerable*, they say, *how could anyone accept it?* My sympathies are with them. I know how hard it is for a tough-minded modern to let the still voice of eternal truth speak to him. A previous age of inquisitors would be lighting its fires at this point, preparing to annihilate the unbelievers. In the Gospel it isn’t like that. Jesus turns to his own, and faces *them* with the great choice. *What about you - are you going too?* and suddenly we realize that the penalty for this crisis will be visited, not on the audience, but on the rejected prophet himself. If you want to know why Jesus was crucified, and the meaning of the mockery he endured, start searching here.

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