

As we continue to hear the Bread of Life discourse from John's gospel, the question of Jesus' origin crops up. The Jewish people contest his claim to be the "Bread from Heaven," saying that they know his father and mother. And they begin to sound like the Israelites of Moses' day, who grumbled and complained against the Lord.

Here we have the theme for this section of the Bread of Life discourse. The theme is who is this man. Is he merely a man, or is he the one who was sent from the Father? This, of course is the question central to our Christian faith. Who do we believe Jesus to be? Is he just a man? Is a great moral teacher, is a con-artist, or is he the Son of God, the one sent by the Father?

Certainly, we cannot say that Jesus is a merely a great moral example, after all, as C.S. Lewis keenly points out,

"That is the one thing we must not say. A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

I think CS Lewis is has touched upon something extremely important, and that is that we can't treat Jesus like another man, or even like a really good man. Anyone who claims the authority that Jesus claimed, the authority of being the one sent by God, is either a liar, and a very bad person for claiming that his agenda was the divine agenda, or he is who claims to be, in which case, we'd better listen to him.

In the Gospel Jesus reminds us that the prophets foretold that God would teach His people. And again we hear Jesus make that claim of divinity - anyone who listens to the Father will come to me. So Jesus is really laying it on thick here. He's not really giving much wiggle room. He says if you are really listening to the Father, than you will recognize him, because He is the one who comes from the Father.

This is a radical claim. You see, in the Jewish tradition, people claimed greatness by their lineage. Being related to certain ancestors gave you more or less prestige. So when the Jews claim to know where Jesus is from, they are challenging his claim of divinity, and Jesus does not back away form this challenge but faces it head on. To emphasize this, he claims to have an authority that is even greater than that of Moses. Remember, Moses heard God, but never look God face to face. Jesus claims to have seen the Father face to face. Moses gave an imperfect bread to the people, a bread that did not prevent them from dying. Jesus claims to be the source of eternal life.

Make no doubt about it, this man is claiming to be God. And for those of us who accept this claim as true, we are bound to follow Him and his teachings. For the early Church this was difficult task. It meant renouncing everything a person had grown accustomed to for this radical new way of life. When people were baptized into the early Church, they were renouncing one way of life and accepting a way of life that was totally foreign to the society in which they lived. They were rejecting a social structure that viewed humans as the pawns who needed to appease the

numerous gods. They rejected systems of human and animal sacrifice. Instead they held to the belief that their God was not another god, but the one and only God. They embraced a way of life that held all people to be given equal dignity by the fact that they were made in the image and likeness of the one true God. They held a way of life that had a radical concern for the poor, and embraced the cross as the way to eternal life.

Make no mistake, the members of the early Church, in accepting that Jesus was God, were forced to reject the word as they knew it. And I cannot imagine what a difficult task this was. And numerous of our brothers and sisters literally gave their entire beings because they truly believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and that no one else could provide the bread that gives eternal life.

We, of course, are asked to express this same belief. Of course, most of us don't do so while facing the threat of martyrdom. In fact, by enlarge, our ancestors in the faith have laid the groundwork for creating a society that accepts several Christian principles. Thanks to Christianity, people generally hold that all people are created with equal dignity, at least conceptually. Generally speaking, most people accept that our dignity as a human being is not related to our sex, nationality or race, even if that ideal is not lived out perfectly. So in some way, we have to be thankful for those who have gone before us, and trusted in Christ enough that they were able to change the world with their lives.

But in other ways, there is still a lot of work to be done. While our society has incorporated some of these Christian values, it has also blended these with other values. Certainly we can see this with life issues, such as abortion, war, death penalty, embryonic stem cell research, and end of life care. Certainly we have seen this in regards to family issues, as the sanctity of marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman is constantly challenged. And we also see it in economic issues, where we are often so worried about not having enough for the future, that we hoard resources rather than share them with the poor.

So, as I see it, the challenge we face from today's Gospel is how much stock do we put in Christ's claim to be God. If we believe that He, and only He is the one who can give eternal life, can we speak against the culture of death, and promote a culture of life? Can we uphold Christian principles regarding our bodies and sexuality in opposition to a culture that so often objectifies the body for financial gain? Can we worry a little less about our own material well being and a little more about the well being of others.

If we believe Christ to be who he claims, if we believe him to be the one Sent by the Father, if we believe Him to be the bread of eternal life, then the answer should be yes.