

Spiritual Hunger and the Bread of Life

August 8, 2015 Carl E. Olson



Readings:

- 1 Kgs 19:4-8
- Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
- Eph 4:30—5:2
- Jn 6:41-51

“I’m hungry! I’m starving!” What parent hasn’t heard this (often exaggerated) complaint?

It is common to young children, but certainly not limited to them. When I was in high school I went on a ten-day hiking trip with a small church group. On the seventh day, due to poor planning, the food ran out and the complaints began. For a couple of days I had a very small taste—so to speak!—of what the Israelites experienced while wandering in the desert. Like them, I murmured and grumbled about the leaders: “But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!” (cf. Ex. 16:2-4).

That complaint was part of the Old Testament reading last week. In today’s Gospel we find that the Jews—those religious leaders ardently opposed to the person and message of Jesus—were murmuring and complaining. They were upset by his claim to be the “bread of heaven that came down from heaven.” The basis for their murmuring disbelief can be summarized quite simply: “We know who this Jesus

really is!” This exchange, after all, took place near Capernaum, which was the center for much of Jesus’ public life and ministry (cf. Jn. 2:12; Mk. 2:1).

Jesus responded to the complaints by appealing to the two authorities found throughout his discourses in the Fourth Gospel: the Father and the prophets. Belief in the Son, he said, is a gift from the Father, and testimony to this fact is given by the prophets, whose entire mission was to exhort the people to hear God, learn from Him, and obey Him. The Son was sent to draw men to the Father; likewise, no man comes to the Father except through the Son.

This exclusive claim, which was just beginning to come into focus for the Jews listening to Jesus, is just as demanding and divisive today as it was two thousand years ago. This is why the Church, from the day of her birth, has had to address every sort of skewed understanding and false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus then uttered the third, “Amen, amen,” of this discourse. The first (v. 26) had been a rebuke of the selfish motives and lack of faith shown by those following him. The second (v. 32) prefaced the revelation that he is the bread of life. The third is an invitation to faith: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.” The manna in the wilderness was indeed miraculous in its source, but natural in its substance; those who ate it were physically nourished for a while, but eventually died.

The new manna, said the ordinary-looking Jewish carpenter to the murmuring crowd, is not a material object, but a divine person: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” Having earlier performed a miracle involving simple bread, Jesus provided the spiritual basis for the stunning sacramental reality that would come to fruition at the Last Supper, on the eve of his crucifixion: “the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

In the words of Moses, spoken many generations before to those complaining in the desert, this “is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat” (Ex. 16:15). Yet the bread of life can appear to be so ordinary, so commonplace, that who and what it is escapes our earth-bound gaze. Although the people listening to Jesus had hungered for ordinary bread, many of them did not hunger for spiritual bread. “For this bread,” wrote St. Augustine, “requires the hunger of the inner person.”

The great joy of our heavenly Father is to hear us say, as we come forward to receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of his Son: “I’m hungry! I’m starving!” Instead of a murmuring complaint, this should be a cry of joy, a prayer of thanksgiving, and a public expression of faithful recognition.