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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel NYC
August 8, 2021
19th Sunday of Year B John 6:41-51

In today's Gospel Jesus refers to Himself as the "bread of life." At the very same time that He is speaking these words, 1500 miles away, at what was then the center of the civilized world, the city of Rome, the capital of a vast empire, that same word "bread" was being used in a very different way. As Rome was beginning its slow decline from the glory days of republican austerity to those of imperial excess, at that same moment a movement was growing that would in time transform the Roman Empire and eventually the whole world. That, of course, was the movement initiated by Jesus of Nazareth in one of the most obscure corners of the empire.

In that light, today's gospel shows in stark contrast what was the best that the Roman emperors, who had recently adopted the custom of claiming themselves to be "gods," could offer to the common people as a way of maintaining their allegiance. And what Jesus of Nazareth, God's Word made flesh, offered to His disciples. The best that the Roman Emperors could offer their people was "bread and circuses," i.e., "bread" to keep them sufficiently fed so that they would not get restless and rise in rebellion, and "circuses" or public entertainments to keep them amused and distracted. Jesus instead offers what even the insane Emperor Caligula would not dare to propose—Jesus offers Himself. He offers Himself as the "bread of life.... life for the world... the bread that comes down from heaven, (of which if anyone should eat) that person shall live forever."

In today's gospel Jesus makes the link between "bread" and "life." No doubt we presume we catch the point that He is making, i.e., that one needs bread to live; that Jesus, as bread, in some metaphorical sense gives life. But in ancient times the link between bread and life was even closer. Because for the common people bread was not just something one ate off a side plate, or refrained from eating altogether, if one was dieting. For most people at the time, bread was the main course. Two thirds of the average person's diet was comprised of grain products; meat was only eaten a few times a year; fruit when in season, and fish went available. As a result the average lifespan was only about 35-40 years Those of famous individuals who lived into their 60's or 70's were the rich elite. So, when Jesus offers Himself as the "bread of life," He is not presenting Himself as some side dish that can be taken or not, depending upon one's preference and taste. No, He is presenting Himself as what we cannot live—live in the fullest sense--without.

Jesus says that the “bread” that He provides is the bread of “eternal life.” But the key thing to remember is that in St. John’s Gospel “eternal life” is not simply something we hope to experience when we die, but begins even now. “Eternal life” means that the reality of love and freedom and justice, as grounded in God, has invaded our world in the person of Jesus. We have access to that reality even now by faith in Jesus and sharing in the Eucharistic bread. So, St. Paul can write, “the world as we know it is passing away.” What he meant was that the brutality, the corruption, the hedonism of the Roman Empire was already giving away to a new manner of life, one fashioned after the example Jesus gave us. (That was certainly a very daring claim, considering that Christians were a miniscule segment of society at the time.) Still, we wait to see our world transformed by that Power, bestowed by the Spirit of the Risen Jesus. And if we do not see it in our lifetimes, then, when we are united with the risen Christ. We live in hope not knowing precisely what that existence will be, but employing the word of the philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Because of the beauty I have seen, I trust my Creator for what I have not yet seen.” If God could have created a universe so complex and beautiful, from the micro level to the macro, God can provide for our existence beyond the grave—in ways beyond our imagining.

You may remember the old Latin hymn sung in praise of the Eucharist, “O Esca Viatorum, “O Food of Wayfarers,” food for people on a journey. It was a reminder that the Eucharist, which we shall receive and consume in a few minutes, is the nourishment of Christ’s presence, given to us in our journey through life, to alleviate all our hungers—physical, emotional and spiritual. Let us pray to be ready to receive what Jesus offers to us.