Dear Friends,

Ahab of Israel married a pagan queen, Jezebel, who imported pagan worship into Israel. The prophet Elijah challenged 450 of the pagan god Baal’s prophets, defeated them in a public sacrifice-contest and killed all of them. The furious Queen Jezebel sent soldiers to kill the prophet. Today’s first reading expresses Elijah’s discouragement and frustration as he fled for his life. Reaching the rock bottom of his life he prays for death. God heard His prophet’s prayer and sent an angel to feed him and strengthen him in his flight. The miraculous food provided by God sustained him through a 40-day pilgrimage to Horeb (Mount Sinai), where Elijah would be commissioned again as God’s prophet to carry on the struggle and to anoint his successor.

Like Elijah, all of us learn to recognize our weakness and frailty and can experience God’s empowering grace which can transform our powerlessness and discouragement. The Liturgy of the Word compares God’s strengthening of his prophet by the miraculously provided food with His strengthening of us in our pilgrimage to Heaven by the Bread from Heaven, namely, the Holy Eucharist.

It may be challenging for us modern minds to believe the proposition that God could be our food and drink. It is just as difficult to believe anything wonderful about ourselves such as eternal life, to hope that there is anything more to sustain us than matter chewed, drunk, and digested. In his conflict with the people around him, Jesus asks them to have Faith. This faith is challenging them to accept something beyond anything they have heard before. The transcendent takes flesh.

It is interesting to find the “Jews” “murmuring” at the discourse on the bread of life, just as the children of Israel did in the wilderness (Exodus 16). The use of this same verb can hardly be accidental, and it calls further attention to the manna/Eucharist typology. They murmur because of another typical explanation in St. John’s style of writing. They know where Jesus came from, they know his parentage. It is as if they know so much about Jesus, that his claim of coming down from heaven cannot be true.

This type of mindset can prevent us too, from believing in the “real presence” of Jesus in the Eucharist. This rationalization will leave with no point to the journey of our life, no answer to the quest of our minds, no final satisfaction for the hunger of our hearts.

Jesus’ reply to the misunderstanding asserts that a knowledge of his heavenly origin is possible only to those who are “drawn to him” in faith by the Father. To be drawn is further defined as hearing and learning from the Father. Faith is not, however, just abstract, notional insight; it involves participating in “eternal life.” Faith is also paradoxical: on the one hand it is a free decision we must make, but on the other hand it involves the gift from God.

To follow Jesus is to live by Faith; to believe means to make those necessary changes to one’s lifestyle that being a believer demands. Then Jesus offers the ultimate reassurance to every one of us who believes: “I will raise him up on the last day”. Our most comforting thought is that after this tough life, ‘our retirement will be out of this world!’ This persistent theme serves to remind us that only Jesus, the true Bread of Life, can impart the gift of eternal life.

Be blessed, Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

August 8, 2021

19th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
FIRST READING
He got up, ate, and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb. (I Kgs 19:8)

PSALM
Taste and see the goodness of the Lord. (Ps 34)

SECOND READING
So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma. (Eph 5:1-2)

GOSPEL
“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.” (Jn 6:44)


GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

The lens through which we view life makes a difference. It also determines who we choose to learn from and what we allow to shape our thoughts and feelings. For many, life is simply what it appears to be, a given that either through evolution or some other means just came to be. There is no apparent rhyme or reason to things and things can be dissected and understood only in terms of what they empirically present. To the person using this lens, a tree is a tree and a flower is a flower. Their composition and existence can be understood only to the extent that current human knowledge allows. Through this lens, what gives life purpose and meaning? This lens has an essentially unknown beginning and definite end. Once those are accepted, the middle becomes some kind of pursuit of happiness, with values and principles being things that are self-created and found acceptable.

But there is a Divine lens that also exists and deserves mention. It is found when one stumbles upon faith and begins to see things differently. This lens is of God and reveals a Divine Energy and Life that flows through and in all things. Faith then shows us that all that lives come from this one Source of Love. This is the only true lens that can give human beings the purpose and meaning they desperately need. From this perspective, all of life is much more than what is immediately apparent! It now tells and reveals a story about God generous, creative, and unconditional love! The unfolding of the human story is the unfolding of God’s story. What meaning our lives have when they are viewed as a part of God’s love affair with humanity! We are indeed special.

The lens of our faith asks us to learn from Jesus Christ. Jesus, as the real Bread of Life, shows us our eternal destiny and completes and frames our lives. It is only in allowing ourselves to be taught by Jesus, that faith, hope, and love take on much greater importance. All the relationships in our lives are now structured and ordered using God’s primary commandment of love. Jesus, then, is not just some man who lived at some point in history. Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who shows us the way, the truth, and the life. Using this lens changes things up a great deal. Looking at the creation that surrounds you and the special unique people you love, what is God trying to teach you about His love for you and the eternal life He wants you to have?
The first reading, 1 Kgs 19:4 - 8

Elijah, a prophet of covenant renewal, is a new-Moses figure, echoing many features of the latter's life. His altar on Mount Carmel with its twelve stones "according to the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob" (18:31f) matches the altar of Moses at Sinai (Ex 24:4). In today’s narrative, his journey of "forty days and forty nights" (v8) recalls the stay of Moses on Sinai (Ex 24:18); his later entering the cave at Horeb (v9) recalls the location of Moses when gaining his glimpse of Yahweh (Ex 33:22).

The event takes place after Elijah’s life has been threatened by Jezebel (v2). The prophet flees for his life to Beer-sheba in southern Judah and then on to the desert (vv3f). His state of depression leads to a death wish (v4). He is twice miraculously fed by an angel, a visible manifestation of Yahweh himself (vv6ff). The twofold eating fortifies him sufficiently for the trip to Horeb, the name for Sinai in the Elohist and Deuteronomic tradition.

Together with the Moses motif, the experience of the prophet is intended to reproduce the experience of Israel in being provided food and drink in the desert (Ex 16 - 17).

In Christian usage this passage has a twofold interest: (1) it is a type of Jesus’ fast in the wilderness and of the Church’s Lenten fast (this passage forms the Old Testament lesson for Friday in the first week of Lent in Lesser Feasts and Fasts of the Episcopal Church); (2) it forms a type of holy communion considered as the food of pilgrims on their way to the mountain of God (it is used as the fifth alternative Old Testament reading for the votive Mass of the Holy Eucharist). On this Sunday it has obviously been chosen to parallel the continuation of the discourse on the bread from heaven in today’s Gospel.

The second reading, Ephesians 4:30-5:2

The second reading contains St. Paul’s practical advice for peaceful, communal Christian living among former enemies, namely, the now-converted Jews and the converted Gentiles. Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians that their discipleship must be guided by the virtues of compassion and forgiveness, avoiding “bitterness, fury, shouting, and reviling which would grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” That is how they should live their lives, offering their sufferings as sacrifices pleasing to God, just as Jesus, “the Bread from Heaven,” offered himself as a “sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma.” It is Faith that strengthens us to live this way, doing the right thing in our relationships with others, in a world filled with terror and violence and in a Church marked by betrayal and disillusionment. One of the results of life in the Spirit is the imitation of God after the example of Christ, a possibility for us to live as a new community, a true Body of Christ, as the Church. This is the way Jesus chose to be for all of us, a sign of the great love God has for us.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

The complaint launched: In today’s portion of the lengthy Bread of Life discourse (49 of Chapter Six’s 71 verses), John re-emphasizes the similarities and contrasts between the old “manna in the wilderness” experience and this new notion of a “Bread of Life” that is directly tied to Jesus. In verse 41, John’s noting of the Jewish identity of the “complaining” crowd, recalls for us their own unique history. Those listening to Jesus began to “murmur” against Jesus and his gifts of Heavenly Bread, even as the ancient Israelis began to “murmur” or “complain” against Moses — first out of hunger (Exodus 16:2-7,12), then against the monotony of the manna diet (Numbers 11:4-6). Like the Israelites, we, too, complain when God fails to meet our expectations. Many scientists think that these “flakes” were formed from honey-dew secreted by a certain insect that fed on the sap of tamarisk trees (yum!). In the dry desert air, most of the moisture in the honey-dew quickly evaporated, leaving sticky droplets of the stuff on plants and the ground. Since the Exodus, manna became the living symbol of God’s providence and love for the Jewish people.

Jesus’ response: Jesus knew that the Jews were upset about the explanation that the multiplication of bread and fish signified that Jesus himself was the Heavenly Bread that gives eternal Life. Jesus challenged the Jews to take a journey of Faith by seeing, not “the son of Joseph,” but the “one who came down from Heaven.” Saying, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me...” Jesus told his listeners, and tells us, that everyone who has become a disciple has done so because God the Father has called him or her to Jesus. It is an act of God that has brought us to follow the way of Jesus. Faith is a gift. To follow Jesus is to live by Faith; to believe means to make those necessary changes to one’s lifestyle that being a believer demands. Then Jesus offers the ultimate reassurance to every one of us who believes: “I will raise him up on the last day” (cf. vv.39, 40, 44, 54). This persistent theme serves to remind the reader/listener that only Jesus, the true Bread of Life, can impart the gift of eternal Life to the faithful. Jesus is a source of life, giving himself to us by his own self-sacrificing love.
1. We need to appreciate God’s love for us, expressed in the Holy Eucharist.

Pope John Paul II taught: “The Eucharist is the Sacrament of the Presence of Christ, who gives himself to us because he loves us. He loves each one of us in a unique and personal way in our practical daily lives: in our families, among our friends, at study and work, in rest and relaxation. He loves us when he fills our days with freshness, and also when, in times of suffering, he allows trials to weigh upon us: even in the most severe trials, he lets us hear his voice. To celebrate the Eucharist, ‘to eat his Flesh and drink his Blood,’ means to accept the wisdom of the Cross and the path of service. It means that we signal our willingness to sacrifice ourselves for others, as Christ has done” Encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia (Holy Thursday, April 17, 2003).

2. We are participating in Christ in the Eucharistic celebration.

The “Sacrifice of the Altar” is our participation in the entirety of Christ – his life, ministry, crucifixion and death for our sins, Resurrection, and Ascension to Heaven. We are united with Jesus by offering our lives to him so that Jesus can minister to the world through us. We sacrifice our will when and where it interferes with his, which results in our being raised up to new life as we follow Christ to Heaven. Every Catholic Mass accomplishes this by providing us with our Savior’s Body and Blood, soul and Divinity, crucified and Risen, here and now, in the form of edible Food. As Pope St. John Paul II pointed out in Ecclesia de Eucharistia, “The Second Vatican Council rightly proclaimed that the Eucharistic banquet of Mass is ‘the source and summit of the Christian life.’”

QUIZ TIME

1. What did Elijah ask God for?
   a. Money
   b. Friends
   c. Death
   d. A map

2. What did the angel tell Elijah to do?
   a. Stop complaining
   b. Get up and eat
   c. Pray some more
   d. Spread the gospel

3. In the second reading, who does Paul tell us to imitate?
   a. Himself
   b. God
   c. Peter
   d. John the Baptist

4. Who is the living bread that came down from Heaven?
   a. Adam
   b. Moses
   c. Jesus
   d. Elijah

5. What does Jesus say is the bread He will give us to eat?
   a. His Body
   b. Manna
   c. The Holy Spirit
   d. Sourdough