

## **Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B**

**August 5, 2012**

**INTRODUCTION:** Last Sunday's gospel was about Jesus feeding a great multitude of over 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The people were so impressed by this miracle that they wanted to make him their king. The idea may have been tempting to Jesus, perhaps thinking that as king he may have greater influence on a greater number of people, thus facilitating the coming of God's kingdom. Yet, he knew his Father had a different plan, one that went beyond giving people free food. His mission was to change hearts, a mission that would cause the political and religious leaders of his day to feel as if he was threatening their power and position. The disciples, of course, would have been excited about Jesus being king (it would enhance their social status), so he sent them off in their boat, away from the enthusiastic crowd. He slipped away from everyone and went to a mountain alone to pray. Jesus rejoined his apostles as they were traveling across the sea to Capernaum. He came to them walking on the water. Today's gospel continues with the people catching up with Jesus at Capernaum.

Since the gospel recalls how God fed his people with Manna 1300 years earlier, as they were leaving Egypt and were traveling through the desert to get to the promised land our first reading is from Exodus where that event is described.

**HOMILY:** We could analyze today's gospel verse by verse and it would have so much to say to us. However, to make it simple, I want to focus on just two verses.

The first verse is Jesus' words: "Amen, amen I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled." The key word here is "signs." In last week's gospel, St. John tells us a large crowd was following Jesus because they saw the signs he was performing in healing the sick. John also tells us after the people saw the sign he had done in feeding the multitude, they wanted to make him a king. Here Jesus says the people were looking for him not because they saw signs but because they got a free meal. Signs, however, are not always crystal clear. Of course, we know what a "stop" sign is telling us. But if you are driving in London during rush hour, as I did once, I found the signs were more confusing than helpful. When we look at the clouds, for example, we might not be sure what they are telling us; will there be some rain, a lot of rain, a serious storm or will the clouds just pass over and the sun will shine? What does the mysterious smile of the Mona Lisa say to us? Words are signs, but if they were always clear, there would never be any miscommunication. Jesus worked a sign, but the people grasped it only on one level, the material level. They saw an easy future for themselves, they would be provided for, free food for the rest of their lives, perhaps also thrown in for good measure, they would have a leader that would liberate them from their hated Roman rulers. That's not what Jesus' sign meant. Jesus wanted to feed and nourish them - not, however, on a material level. He would feed their minds, their hearts, their spirits for all eternity. As he says later in John's gospel: "I came that they may have life and may have it to the full." (Jn. 10,10) A lifetime supply of fish sandwiches may satisfy our physical need, but we have

deeper needs than that. The crowd wasn't thinking about those deeper needs, and that's what Jesus needed to explain to them. How many people in today's world do not think about their deep spiritual needs either and all they think of are their material needs? Our spiritual needs are just as practical as our physical needs. Remember, our Lord tells us: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Mt. 4,4) Jesus is being totally practical. Nothing is more practical than finding God...it changes our whole life.

The second verse I propose we reflect on: "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." Here the key word is "work." Faith is work. So many people expect faith to be easy - just say I believe. They expect once they say: "I believe," peace, love and joy will come flowing into their hearts. It works that way, sometimes. Other times following Christ means carrying a cross. "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." (Mt. 16,24) The hard work comes when we accept him on his terms. Too often we try to follow him on our terms. Like the people who got the free meal, we are willing to recognize him as our Lord and king when he does what we want. It's work, however, to get up on Sunday morning when we would rather stay in bed; it's work to resist temptation; it's work to forgive people who have hurt us; it's work accepting some of the crosses that come our way. Although we might say that believing in Jesus and following him is work, when we do give our lives over to him completely, believing in him and following him comes easier, for we will not be left to carry our cross alone. He will be with us...always. Only he can fulfill our deepest hunger. Amen.

## **Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle**

**August 12, 2012**

**INTRODUCTION:** I Kings 19,4-8; Eph. 4,30; John 6, 41-51

Jezebel was an evil queen who reigned in Israel eight hundred fifty years before Christ. One of her many goals in life was to eliminate faith and worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. At the same time, there also lived in Israel the prophet Elijah who was dedicated to serving Yahweh. Naturally, these two would collide. Elijah had just finished working a powerful miracle on Mt. Carmel, a place now known as Haifa, which dramatically demonstrated that Yahweh was truly God, and that the gods Jezebel promoted were non-existent. Jezebel, instead of being converted, became a sore loser. She sent her army after Elijah to kill him. Elijah quickly left the place. He ran to the desert in southern Judea and this is where we meet him in today's first reading. He is hungry, tired and deeply depressed. You will hear in today's reading that God did not desert his faithful prophet. The mountain of God, Horeb, which we will hear mentioned is also Mt. Sinai, the mountain where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

This passage has been chosen because it tells us of a special food God gave Elijah. The passage connects with the gospel where Jesus tells us he is the bread that will strengthen us on our journey through life and into eternal life.

**HOMILY:** Last Sunday's gospel ended with Jesus telling us, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." This is one of the important "I am" statements in John's gospel. Throughout the gospel Jesus uses these statements to help us know who he is. Some of the other statements are: "I am the light of the world," "I am the vine, you are the branches," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the way the truth and the life." Then we have those two words standing alone, when Jesus came to his apostles walking on the water. They were frightened and Jesus said simply "I am. Do not be afraid." The Greek words are usually translated, "It is I" but the literal translation of "Ego eimi" is "I am." It recalls the name God gave to Moses, Yahweh, which is often translated, "I am who am." Unlike the rest of creation, God depends on no other being in order to be. God is being itself. Jesus said the same of himself, "ego eimi," "I am."

In last week's gospel the topic of manna came up. Manna is the bread that God gave his people in the desert as they made their way to the Promised Land. Jesus told them God was giving them something superior to this manna. God wanted to give them the true bread from heaven that gives life to the world. Then Jesus identified himself as that bread of life. He asked his listeners to believe in him and through their belief they would never be hungry or thirsty. In other words, all their needs would be satisfied. It was on that idea that last Sunday's gospel ended. Today's gospel continues, telling us the people murmured. They questioned how he could have come down from heaven. They knew his parents; they knew him when he was growing up. The murmuring is reminiscent of God's people in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. They didn't have faith God would care for them. It's this lack of faith the people show in today's gospel. They wouldn't believe that Jesus could do all these things he promised, that whoever eats the bread that God gives them, which is Jesus himself, that the way to eternal life would open for whoever believed in Jesus.

Having faith is the key to understanding today's gospel. In this section of John's sixth chapter, the focus is on Jesus who is given to us by the Father. He is the bread that nourishes us with eternal life. Our response to his coming to us is faith.

The passage ends with a line that will lead us next week into Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist. Belief in Jesus as the bread of life will naturally lead the believer to eat his body and drink his blood. This is where people's faith is stretched to the limit. I want to make a brief comment about this last line in today's gospel: "the bread that I will give is my flesh..." St. John dedicates a large part of his gospel to the Last Supper, but he does not tell us about the institution of the Eucharist as the other gospels do. John says this about Jesus and the Eucharist: "the bread I will give is my flesh." Can you see how this is a perfect parallel to the words of consecration: when taking bread the priest says: "this is my body." "The bread I will give is my flesh."

Imagine going back in time 1000 years, when people traveled around by either walking or carriage or horseback. As we observe the people, the kings and rulers and the common people, most of whom were farmers, we observed the people's diet, which would have been very simple. We start telling people how they could improve their diet. We tell them about vitamins and cholesterol and protein and carbs and saturated and unsaturated fats and enzymes, etc.

Surely they would think we were crazy. A lot of people thought Jesus was crazy when he told them he was the bread that would bring eternal life. Jesus is telling us today there is more to life than what we think we know or what we can figure out on our own. That's why he tells us to believe in him. Amen.

## **Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle**

**August 19, 2012**

### **INTRODUCTION** (Proverbs 9, 1-6; Ephesians 5, 15-20; John 6, 51-58)

The ninth chapter of the book of Proverbs speaks of two women - women who are symbols and not real: one is the symbol of wisdom and the other symbolizes foolishness. Thus they are named Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly. Each is pictured as the owner of an inn, and both are busy inviting people to stay at their guesthouse and partake of the meal they have prepared. Those who share the hospitality of Lady Wisdom are rewarded with joy and an abundance of life. Those who accept the invitation of Dame Folly are walking into a trap that will result in death. We hear in today's first reading the first part of chapter nine in Proverbs: the invitation of Lady Wisdom. The columns that are part of her house symbolize stability, while the number seven symbolizes perfection.

**HOMILY:** John begins the sixth chapter of his gospel with Jesus feeding over 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The people had seen his healing of the sick and now, after being fed, they began to think, "this is a good deal: free food. If he can do this for us, what more might he do?" So they decide to make him a king. The apostles would benefit greatly by his being a king as their importance in society would be significantly enhanced. He sends his apostles off by boat to Capernaum to get them away from the crowd, and he somehow slips away from the crowd himself. He rejoins his apostles in the middle of the night by walking on the water. When the crowd arrived back at Capernaum, they found Jesus there. Jesus told them their motives in looking for him were superficial. He had better things than a free meal to offer them. It was then Jesus identified himself as the bread of life, a food that would satisfy all their needs. Notice how at this point the focus shifts entirely onto the bread. We don't hear about the fish anymore.

Last week's gospel ended where this week's gospel begins: "the bread that I will give is my flesh." I pointed out how this statement parallels the words of institution at the Last Supper: Jesus took bread and said, "this is my body." This part of chapter six is explicitly Eucharistic. The people had difficulty believing what Jesus was telling them. Jesus did not back down to try to make it easier to accept. He didn't say, "the bread I will give will symbolize my body." He didn't say, "in spirit I will be hidden within the bread that I will give you." He said clearly, "the bread that I will give is my flesh," and he repeated the idea over and over with as much clarity as possible that his flesh and blood were food that would feed a person for eternal life. Because it is hard to believe, people have tried to explain away what Jesus is saying here. We will hear

next week how many of his followers walked away from him after what he had said. Jesus did not call them back or say they misunderstood. Jesus knew they understood him perfectly.

Because they clearly understand the few simple words Jesus spoke, that's why others walk away today. (Everyone knows what "is" means.) I was thinking, "if I were pope I would have this gospel read at least once every two months." This is one of the biggest challenges Catholics have with their faith - believing Jesus is speaking seriously here. Jesus is very serious: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you...For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." This eating and drinking is not a once in a while thing. It's like a good diet. We can't eat a healthy meal once in a while and expect it to do much for us. Jesus says, "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." The body and blood of Christ maintains an ongoing relationship with Jesus.

The bread and the wine do not symbolize the body and blood of Christ. They are the body and blood of Christ. Because they are, they do symbolize a number of things, as for example, with his body and blood Christ keeps his divine life alive within us just as our daily food and drink keep us alive physically; that Christ loves us and wants to be close to us and wants us to stay close to him; the separate elements of body and blood represent our participation in Jesus' sacrificial death for us.

Our faith reminds us constantly that we live in two worlds. We live in the world we know and a world we don't know. The world we know encompasses all the things we can perceive through our senses and all the things we can conceive with our intellect. The world we do not know we will meet up with some day in all its glory. It is beyond our ability to know with our senses or our rational mind. We can only know it vaguely through analogy. We believe that Jesus came to reveal to us as much as we are capable of understanding what it will be like. "The one who comes from heaven testifies to what he has seen and heard," he tells Nicodemus. (Jn 3, 31)

He has not only told us about the world that is to come for all of us, but he has given us a path to follow, the path of faith, hope and love for God and for others. He has given us a special help to strengthen us as we make this journey - his own flesh and blood. It's all spelled out clearly in today's gospel. The Eucharist is our connection with the world to come. "Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me." (Jn. 6, 57) What more can be said? Lots more, but we can't try to say it all today. Amen.

## **21st Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle**

**August 26, 2012**

**INTRODUCTION** - (Joshua 24,1-2a,15-17,18b; Eph 5,21-32; John 6,60-69) A man was robbing a bank and as he stood at the teller's window with a gun in his hands, his mask fell off. He quickly put it back on and turned to a man who was a bank customer and asked him, "Did you

see my face?" The man said "yes, I saw you." And so the robber shot him. Then he turned to a couple who were standing nearby and said to the wife, "Did you see my face?" The wife said "No, I didn't see you. But my husband did!"

I wonder if that husband might have been the type of person who would give his wife a jab in the ribs when the lector reads today's second reading. Paul says "wives should be subordinate to their husbands." God did not make either husband or wife to be a dictator of the other. When you hear this reading, keep in mind the first sentence where Paul says to both husbands and wives: "Be subordinate to one another..." You might notice that Paul is just as demanding (and maybe even more so) of husbands in this passage than he is of wives. Marriage involves mutual love and respect.

Shortly after God's people arrived in the Promised Land, Joshua, who became their leader after Moses died, gathered the people together to renew their covenant with Yahweh. They enthusiastically chose to commit themselves to follow God faithfully. History tells us later generations did not remain so enthusiastically faithful. In contrast with this commitment of fidelity, we hear in today's gospel that many of Jesus' disciples chose not to follow him after his teaching on the Eucharist. All the apostles stayed with him.

**HOMILY** - I'm sure it is somewhat uncomfortable to go to Mass with a lot of scaffolding between you and the altar. So I'll try not to make you suffer too long. Today we hear the conclusion of the sixth chapter of John's gospel. It began with Jesus feeding a huge crowd of people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The chapter moved on to a discussion about Jesus being the bread of life, then to Jesus' statement that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood if we wish to share in eternal life. We see in today's gospel the reaction to Jesus' teaching. People thought he was out of his mind and walked away from him. Jesus didn't try to explain what he had said so clearly and emphatically. The fact that Jesus let the people leave, knowing that they understood him literally, is a strong proof to me that this is the way he wants us to understand him when he says, "this is my body - this is the chalice of my blood."

As the people were walking away, Jesus simply asked his apostles if they wanted to leave him too. Peter, who often puts his foot in his mouth, came across this time with the right answer: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

Sometimes it's the only answer we can give to events in our lives. God's ways are often hidden from us. God tells us he loves us, he will always be with us, but we don't always experience that love or his presence. He tells us to love our enemies. To forgive those who have hurt us. To eat his body and drink his blood. Our faith challenges us to believe in what we cannot see or prove or perhaps not always feel or makes sense. In times of confusion or distress, we pray for help, we pray to understand. Our prayers seem to be unanswered. We seek counseling. Maybe it helps. But sometimes all we can end up doing is to say: "I believe. If Jesus said it, if Jesus said he loves us, he is with us, especially in the Eucharist, then I believe it because I believe in Jesus and he speaks the words of eternal life." That my friends is what faith is, pure and simple.

I promised I would not make you watch through the scaffolding too long, so I'll conclude my homily with that message. Amen.