

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B
August 2, 2015

INTRODUCTION: Last Sunday we heard about Jesus feeding a great multitude of thousands of 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. Even if Jesus thought that keeping people's stomachs full was perhaps a nice idea, he knew that's not what his ministry was all about. It's not why God the Father sent him into this world. His mission was to change hearts, a mission that threatened the power and position of the religious leaders of his day. The disciples, of course, would have been excited about Jesus being king (they would end up with an important position in the kingdom), so he sent them off in their boat, away from the enthusiastic crowd. He then slipped away from everyone and went to a mountain alone to pray. Later on, in the middle of the night, Jesus came walking on the surface of the water and joined his apostles. Eventually, their boat arrived at Capernaum. It was at Capernaum that the people caught up with him. That's where our gospel begins.

In their conversation with Jesus, the people bring up the topic of God feeding his people with Manna in the desert, 1300 years earlier, when they left Egypt and were headed to the promised land. Our first reading is about the Manna in the desert because it is mentioned in the gospel.

HOMILY: I mentioned in my introduction that after Jesus fed the multitude miraculously, the people wanted to make him a king. The apostles would have loved that idea, so Jesus sent them off in their boat and he went off to pray. He did return to them walking on the surface of the water, and stayed with them as they reached Capernaum. The people finally caught up with Jesus there. They tried to find out how and when he got there. I say all this so you can see the important connection between the feeding of the multitude and the conversation about it that followed. The people start the conversation by asking when Jesus arrived at Capernaum and immediately Jesus takes the conversation to a deeper level. Jesus knew why they were looking for him, they got a free meal, but they did not understand that what Jesus had done in the feeding was a sign – a sign that would have a message for them.

So let's reflect on signs for a moment. They are so important because they are the primary way by which we communicate with one another. Thus, our lives are surrounded by signs. Not just store signs or street signs, but also the subtle signs we give one another like a smile or a look of disappointment or anger. Even the very words I'm using are signs. For example, if I say the word "elephant," the image of an elephant comes into your mind. If I were speaking in Greek, or we were driving through China, the signs would not communicate with us. We wouldn't know what they were trying to tell us. Jesus had just fed a great multitude, but it was meant to tell the people something. They didn't catch its meaning and what Jesus was talking about. He tells them "do not labor for food that perishes." Of course, we do have to labor for our food. God told Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit that he would have to "earn your bread by the sweat of your brow." (Gen. 3,19) But Jesus wanted the people to know there are things even more important than having something to eat when we're hungry. "What things?" a person without any spiritual vision might ask. Jesus' answer is that it is food that he's willing to offer us, food that will satisfy us and bring us eternal life. This is what Jesus has to offer. God the Father himself has put his guarantee (his seal) on Jesus' ministry and on the great gift that Jesus has to offer.

Next it seems as if the people are asking “if you offer this food that endures for eternal life, how do we get some? What does God want us to do in order to have this special food.” Jesus’ answer, “believe in the one he sent.” As they begin to catch on that Jesus is asking them to believe in him, they ask “what are you going to do to make us believe in you?” This is where they introduce the idea of the Manna. God gave their ancestors Manna (bread from heaven) while they were in the desert, maybe they wanted Jesus to do something greater. Jesus said “no, I am the real bread from heaven...which gives life to the world.” (Notice here is one of the “I am” statements which we find so frequently in John’s gospel.)

Before we close the book on today’s gospel, I want to reflect on two other important words in this section: the words “work” and “believe.” The people ask “what can we do to accomplish the works of God.” Jesus said “believe in the one he sent.” Basically, if we are going to have faith (and live our faith – they’re both the same thing), it takes work. So many people I have counselled want living their faith to be easy, to never have their faith challenged by hard times or by difficult people. I truly think that many people have an unexpected expectation that if I do everything God wants, then God should do everything I want. There is a ring of fairness to that. Well, God doesn’t always do everything we want and God didn’t promise to make the road easy; he just promised he would always be with us. For example, God doesn’t always make us feel excited about getting up on Sunday to go to Mass; we might prefer to stay in bed or watch TV. Or if it’s time to pray, do we jump for joy or do we feel like we do when it’s time to exercise. God doesn’t always make it easy to forgive someone who hurt us or to love that disagreeable relative or neighbor. God doesn’t always make it easy to be pure or generous or humble or to face the truth about ourselves when we know we’re wrong but we don’t want to admit it. Are these things work? Not always, but sometimes they are. I think that’s given us enough to think about regarding today’s gospel (three words: signs, faith and work). So, we’ll leave it there with this promise that we will reflect on Jesus as the bread of eternal life in much greater depth in the next few weeks.

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle August 9, 2015

INTRODUCTION: *1 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 in Israel, there also lived the prophet Elijah who was dedicated to serving Yahweh. Naturally, these two would collide. Just previous to today’s first reading from the Book of Kings, Elijah had worked a powerful miracle on Mt. Carmel, a place now known as Haifa, which dramatically demonstrated in the presence of the King, 450 of the pagan priests, and all the people of Israel, 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 got out of town. He ran to the desert in southern Judea and this is where we meet him in today’s first reading. He is hungry, tired, deeply depressed and hoping to die. However, God did not desert his faithful prophet. Instead, God sent Elijah to the same mountain in Sinai where God had given Moses the 10 Commandments, that is, to Mt. Sinai, aka Mt. Horeb.

This passage has been chosen because it speaks of a special food God gave Elijah, a food that sustained him in his journey to Mt. Horeb for 40 days and 40 nights. 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: My intent today is to try to pull together what we've already heard from the sixth chapter of St. John's gospel and to tie it together with what is yet to come. The sixth chapter of John begins with the account of Jesus feeding over 5000 people in a miraculous way. After this demonstration, the people decided they wanted to make him their king. Not only had he fed people, but he healed people. They were smart enough to know they would have a good thing going if they had Jesus as their king. But Jesus had a mission that was bigger than what the people had in mind – he came to save the world, not just one group of people or even one nation – and his mission of salvation would lead to salvation that would last forever. So Jesus stealthily slipped away from the crowd.

When the people found Jesus a short time later, he explained to them that there's lots more to life than getting free health care and having free food to eat every day. "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you," we heard him say in last week's gospel. Jesus sounds as if he's not being practical – but he is very practical. We do have to be concerned about our everyday material needs, and we need to be concerned about the needs of others who cannot provide for themselves. Recall it is the same Jesus who told us that we will be judged on such criteria as "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink, naked and you clothed me, etc." In this passage from John's gospel, Jesus wants us to see the bigger picture. There is a whole other life and a whole other world beyond this present life, a life that will have no ending, and as we journey through this life, we must prepare for what comes next.

Jesus came to reveal that world to us. The bread and fish he had recently fed the crowd was a sign, a sign of something of much greater value he had to give. What he offers is greater than any miracle of feeding we read about in the Old Testament; such as, we heard in today's first reading or God feeding the Hebrew people with manna. The people pretty much followed what Jesus was saying up to this point. They wanted Jesus to feed them with bread from heaven until Jesus informed them he was that bread. "I am bread that came down from heaven," he tells them. In order to enjoy the benefits of what he had to offer, he says we have to believe in him. They found that hard to accept. It contradicted what they knew – they were sure that Jesus didn't come down from heaven. They knew his human origins, his mother and his father. In their certainty, they were blind to knowing who Jesus truly was. Today's gospel was a little difficult to follow, but this is the key to understanding it: that Jesus really did come down from the Father in heaven.

Jesus kept insisting on this. He told them listening and learning from God would make it possible for them to have faith in Jesus. The implication is that the crowd failed to listen and learn from God and preferred to murmur about what Jesus was saying. This is saying to us that Jesus is the bread of life for us when we learn from him, when we pray to him, when we follow his ways. He nourishes our spirit with his spirit, his wisdom and his love. In those ways he feeds us. As hard as it was for the people to accept Jesus as the bread of life that has come down from heaven, whom they are to believe in, Jesus really blew their mind when he said further "the bread I will give is my flesh." This is another way he feeds us, not just through having faith in him, but feeding us with his body and blood, a special unity with him that we will reflect on next week. Amen.

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle August 16, 2015

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

In the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is symbolized as a person and is referred to as Lady Wisdom. She is pictured as the owner of an inn. The columns that are part of her house symbolize stability, while the number seven symbolizes perfection. In today's reading, she is busy inviting people to lodge at her guesthouse and partake of the food she has prepared. Those who accept her invitation will be rewarded with joy and an abundance of life. In the gospel, Jesus invites us to partake of the food he offers, his flesh and blood, so that we may enjoy the fullness of life.

HOMILY:

Today's gospel is one of the most controversial and hotly debated passages in John's gospel. (*The New Interpreter's Bible – Vol IX –pg 605*) John began chapter six by telling us about Jesus feeding a great crowd of people (over 5000) with five loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish. Jesus and John called this miracle a "sign." For the last two weeks, we have heard Jesus interpret the meaning of this sign. Having faith in Jesus has been the main focus of what had been said about the meaning of this sign so far. For example, two weeks ago we heard Jesus say: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever **believes** in me will never thirst." Or "this is the work of God, that you **believe** in the one he sent."

You might have noticed by now, there is no mention of the fish. Bread has become the main subject of the gospel passages we've been hearing. It's not bread that will satisfy our hunger for a few hours, however, that Jesus offers us. It is bread from heaven that Jesus wants to give us, bread that gives life to the world. That bread is Jesus – "I am the bread of life," he tells us. Without forgetting what Jesus said about **believing** in him, faith in Jesus is really important. As you will see, believing in him becomes even more challenging regarding what I'm going to say next. Today's passage introduces another important element in interpreting the meaning of the sign of the multiplication of the loaves. Jesus tells us in today's gospel, "the bread that I will give is my **flesh** for the life of the world," and he insists we are to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

This idea really caused a stir among his hearers, but Jesus repeated it again and again. Six times in the next six verses he tells us we must feed on this bread if we want to enter into eternal life. This is where there is all the controversy. Because not all Christians believe what we believe as Catholics, they have to find a way to explain away what Jesus says. Many Christian denominations say Jesus is only speaking symbolically, and he does not mean for us to take him literally. Those who think Jesus was speaking symbolically would also have to consider he was speaking symbolically at the Last Supper when he said "take, eat; this is my body;...drink...this is my blood." (Mt 26,26-28). That would have made for a strange meal with Jesus saying eat and drink, but only eat and drink symbolically. It would be like someone inviting you for dinner and serving you bread and water and telling you this is a symbol of steak and fine wine. If Jesus were speaking symbolically, he would not have allowed many of his followers to walk away because they thought he was out of his mind. He would have called them to come back and say, "wait, you are taking me literally." He knew they were leaving because they were taking him literally, and that's the way he wanted to be understood.

When Jesus said: "this bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world," his hearers asked: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" "How can this be?" is what we all have

asked ourselves at times. In answering that question for myself I just remind myself that God's word has power to create things and to change things. In the beginning of the Bible, God said, "let there be light, let there be plants, fish, birds, animals, etc." and there were. Jesus' words had the power to change things. He could change the weather (calming a storm on the sea), he could change sick and infirm people into well people, he could change a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish into enough to feed a huge crowd of hungry people. When he said this is my body, this is the cup of my blood, do this in memory of me, I believe in the power of those words. Another thing that helps my faith is to think of this: there is energy in bread and wine (and all other foods) and that's what gives us energy. At Mass the energy that is in the bread and wine is replaced by a divine form of energy that feeds the life of God that has been given to us in baptism. When we receive Communion, we don't usually feel much of a change any more than we might not feel a great surge of health and energy when we eat a healthy meal, but through Jesus the bread of life, we are being prepared for eternal life. In all of this, we cannot forget what our Lord said to Thomas after the resurrection: "blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." That's us.

So, stay tuned. We have one more section of Chapter six which gives us a fuller account of the people's reaction to what Jesus said. Amen.

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle August 23, 2015

INTRODUCTION - (*Joshua 24,1-2a,15-17,18b; Eph 5,21-32; John 6,60-69*)

Shortly after Moses led God's people to the Promised Land, Moses died and Joshua took over the position Moses had held. In our reading today, Joshua gathered God's people together to renew their covenant with Yahweh. They enthusiastically chose to commit themselves to follow God faithfully. History has shown that later generations did not remain so faithful or so enthusiastic. The enthusiasm of God's people in today's first reading is contrasted with the unenthusiastic response of many who **had** been following Jesus until he taught them that he was the bread of life. They started walking away thinking he was talking nonsense. To their credit, the apostles, who did not understand Jesus any better than the crowd, stayed with Jesus for they had accepted that Jesus was the Holy One of God.

Today's Letter to the Ephesians, the second reading, encourages married couples to live a life of mutual love and such love will bring them supreme joy.

HOMILY - In last Sunday's gospel, we heard Jesus tell us (over and over) that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. If we do not, we will not have life within us, we will not be raised up in the resurrection on the last day, we will not remain united with Christ, we will not share in God's life. That was a quick summary of last Sunday's gospel which we need to keep in mind in order to better understand today's gospel. Many in Jesus' audience thought Jesus was crazy. How could they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they asked. They were not cannibals and Jews especially were prohibited from consuming any kind of blood. They carefully drained all the blood from an animal before they prepared it for a meal. This is a very strict part of their kosher diet. They believed that life was in the blood and since life came from God, it needed to return to God and could not be consumed. Jesus turned this idea completely around when he

said drink my blood, indicating that through the Eucharist we will share in his life, just as he shares in the life of the living Father.

What Jesus was saying on that occasion is the same thing he said at the Last Supper: “take, eat; this is my body;...drink...this is my blood.” Some scholars question whether Jesus gave this teaching in the gospel or on some other occasion, perhaps even at the Last Supper. They speculate that over the course of time, today’s gospel teaching was moved to its present location in John’s gospel. Do not be surprised that these words of Jesus on the Eucharist may have been spoken at some other time because the gospels were formed in the early Church by remembering and reflecting on the words and deeds of Jesus, and they didn’t always try to get everything in historical sequence. Rather, one event may have called to mind something similar, just as happens when we gather with friends and relatives at Thanksgiving or Christmas and we get to reminiscing about a loved one who died, and we tell about the things we remember. Eventually these remembrances were written down often in thematic sequence rather than in historical sequence some 35 to 60 years after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

The important message for us today is not exactly when Jesus gave us his teaching on the Eucharist but the reaction it produced. We see that many who were initially impressed with Jesus started walking away. Jesus knew they were taking him literally, that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood, and they thought he was saying crazy things. He didn’t try to call them back. He knew what people thought and he wanted them to understand him literally. The Apostles didn’t understand him either, but they believed in him and somehow knew his words were true. I think people who have a problem believing in the Eucharist are not really having a problem with the Eucharist as such. Even though they can’t see or experience anything special, they are really having a problem with believing that Jesus is the Holy One of God. If you can accept that Jesus is God, then it’s easier to accept what he says or does, even if you don’t fully understand it. Ultimately a problem with faith in the Eucharist is a problem with faith in the incarnation, that Jesus is God who has taken on our human flesh so he could speak to us and show us, in a way we could understand, the way to eternal life. Amen.

Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle **August 30, 2015**

INTRODUCTION: Today’s first reading takes us back to the time of Moses, about 1300 years before Christ. Moses knew he would die before God’s people could enter the Promised Land. So he gives the people some last minute instructions before they cross the Jordan. In essence, he is telling God’s people that God loves them and he wants them to prosper. They will do so only if they keep God’s laws. This passage fits well with our other two readings which teach us how important it is to obey God, both for our well-being in this world and our eternal happiness in the next.

HOMILY: As soon as we start to read today’s gospel, we sense there is going to be a battle between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem came to see him. The presence of the scribes is what gives it away that there is going to be a confrontation. The scribes in those days would be like the lawyers of today – they were experts in the law. They had come a long way to find Jesus. They were from Jerusalem we are told, and Jerusalem was about a four days journey on foot. They observed that some of his disciples were eating without having washed their hands. It’s interesting they didn’t accuse Jesus of

doing the same thing. Maybe he was finished eating, maybe he was busy teaching, maybe he remembered to wash his hands. Now, if they had a mother like mine, they would surely have remembered to wash their hands; it is a very good habit to have. But for the Jews, it was more than just a good habit to prevent germs. For the Jews, it was a religious tradition. It was like God turned away from you and was unhappy with you because you didn't wash your hands before eating. Mark tells us about lots of similar rules and regulations.

It's nice to learn that we have a God who is like a Jewish mother, concerned about everything we do. It's interesting to compare the God of Israel to the pagan gods that most other nations worshipped. Those gods were not real, of course, but in the thinking of those who worshipped them, their gods never paid much attention to what their devotees did. A person could do almost anything they wanted, and the gods didn't care as long as their worshippers gave them honor and offered appropriate sacrifice. Maybe that's partly why the Jews were often led into the worship of false gods. Pagan religion wasn't too demanding on them (unless you felt that your god was demanding that you sacrifice one of your children). But Yahweh, the God of Israel, had many rules about how his people were to live. There was more than the ten commandments; there were another 603 commandments dealing with all aspects of life. You can find them scattered about in the first five books of the Bible. Interestingly, the tradition about washing one's hands before eating was not one of the commandments (except for the priest). Handwashing before a meal was a tradition. Such traditions were believed to have come from Moses and Jewish teachers but were never written down. Jesus was being accused of not observing the tradition of the elders.

It was on this basis (that handwashing was a tradition) that Jesus responded to the Pharisees and scribes. They had come to embarrass him and to demonstrate that he was not teaching true doctrine. Jesus told his critics that they were the ones who were not teaching true doctrine because they allowed their traditions to overrule God's laws. Then Jesus turned to his crowd of listeners and made one of the most "revolutionary" statements he had ever made, and he made some big ones in his day. (*cf Vawter, The Four Gospels, pg 188*) He said: "nothing outside a person can enter and make a person unclean; rather the things that come out make that person unclean." (*vs. 15*) An editor gave us the interpretation of this: (*vs 19*) In this manner he declared all foods to be clean. This statement started a battle that the early Church fought over for many years before it was resolved.

Here we see Jesus, not just as a Jewish teacher, but as an authoritative teacher speaking with the divine authority to be able not only to interpret God's law but to change it. The Jewish diet was quite complicated and was seen as coming directly from God through Moses. Jesus, in one sentence, changed it all and clarified what it is that moves God to be unhappy with us. It is what comes out of our heart that makes God displeased with us, such as murder, theft, adultery, avarice, wickedness, licentiousness, envy and pride. In case you are wondering, licentiousness means lacking in moral restraint.

We do have a God who is concerned with the way we live, the way we treat others, and the respect and love we have for him. Too often we let our culture determine what is morally right or wrong rather than getting our sense of what is right and wrong from what God has spoken to us. Our religion is not always easy or convenient, but as Moses said to God's people centuries ago, "be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you...that you may live and prosper, and may have long life in the land which you are to possess." (*Exodus 5,32-33*) Amen.