

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 9, 2009

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 the God Yahweh in Israel. At the same time there also lived in Israel the prophet Elijah who was dedicated to serving Yahweh. Naturally these two would clash. Elijah had just worked 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 that God did not desert his faithful prophet. Mt. Horeb, mentioned in the first reading, is 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: The angel told Elijah: "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you." What must have been in those hearth cakes? Talk about energy drinks and power bars! The Jews ate hearth cakes a lot, which I believe were something like tortillas. No one knows the hidden ingredient in those hearth cakes the angel offered Elijah.

Jesus is offering the people of his own day a food infinitely more potent than Elijah's hearth cakes: "bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die...whoever eats this bread will live forever." If a person really believed this, wouldn't they make sure they had a steady diet of this marvelous food? But Jesus' hearers thought he had flipped out, making such outlandish claims.

Let's suppose a nutritionist from our own time got into a time machine and went back to talk with those people. And the nutritionist told them that certain foods were especially healthy for them and too much of other foods like saturated fat and salt and sugar would lead to numerous types of disease. Our imaginary nutritionist would explain that there are tiny things in food which they cannot see but which will produce good or bad effects on their health. They won't see those effects right away but the good or bad effects of what they eat will show up a few years later, and maybe not even for several years. And lastly the people are told that if the food tastes really wonderful, it's probably not good for them. The nutritionist would probably be considered ridiculous. People wouldn't be able to understand a message like that. Today we know a lot about food and its consequences, even if we don't always follow what we know we should do. Jesus is telling us there is something in the food he offers that will benefit us eternally. It is we who would be the loser if we ignore what he says.

This is one of the greatest tests of our faith in Jesus – to believe something we can't understand, to believe it simply because we trust the one who told us it is so. It's no wonder our Lord tells us we need God's help to accept this, for as he says: "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him."

I have lived with this mystery since I made my first Communion at St. Patrick's Church here in Northside in the second grade. Many times I have questioned how this could be. How could bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. I want to tell you some of the things that have helped my faith. I received a lot of help believing in the Eucharist through meditation on this sixth chapter of John. An article by a psychoanalyst, Ignace Lepp, who was originally an atheist and a Communist and who later became a Catholic priest helped the Eucharist make much more sense to me. I was helped by reading about a German mystic, Teresa Neumann, who died in 1962 who lived for 36 years without any food other than the Eucharist. The Nazi authorities took away her food rations' card during World War II for this reason. From what I've read, I am satisfied that her fasting on nothing but the Eucharist has been verified scientifically. You can look up more information about her on the internet. I have been helped by the deep peace I often feel when I pray before the Blessed Sacrament. I frequently have sensed Jesus' presence. And finally I have been helped by simply choosing to take Jesus at his word: "This is my body" and "this is my blood."

I've never had visions or ecstasies. I have to believe in the Eucharist as much as any of you. Sometimes I think it requires more faith for me, when I realize my own faults and weaknesses and failures and to think that I can say those words of Jesus over bread and wine and at that moment the bread and wine is changed to become Jesus himself.

Elijah didn't know what was in those hearth cakes. In faith, he ate them and began his journey to Mt. Horeb as the angel directed him to do. We have been told what is in the food Jesus offers us, that it is Jesus himself. We just have to do what the angel told Elijah: "get up and eat, else the journey will be too long." We skip meals sometimes when we're in a hurry, but this is one meal we can't skip. We need the strength it gives us as we make our journey to eternal life. Amen.

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 16, 2009

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 – not real women but both are symbols: one is the symbol of wisdom and one the symbol of 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 inn 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 only 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: I want to start off with something I've been wanting to tell all of our people for a long time: Thank you for being here today. It is always a wonderful experience for me to pray with you. I know that three-fourths of you come from outside of Northside, so you are here because you want to be here. I am grateful for your faith, your prayer and your presence. I am grateful every Sunday, even if I don't say it. Today we hear in the gospel one of the most important reasons why we are all here, to be fed by the body and blood of Christ. It is food that promises life eternal.

Before I talk about today's gospel, I want to say a little more about the first reading from Proverbs. The book of Proverbs was written as an instruction for young people, to guide them as they mature. It stresses education, self-discipline, prudence, honesty, good moral character - all of which lead to wisdom. Folly is not just silliness but is a lack of self-control and self-discipline, a conceited attitude, laziness, irreverence, living only for the moment. As I said earlier, wisdom and folly are symbolized in the book of Proverbs as two women calling out to people, especially the young, to partake of the banquet they offer - the first leading to life, the other to the grave. We only heard about Lady Wisdom in today's first reading. Her message is "come, eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live." The words obviously apply to today's gospel where Jesus tells us in a variety of ways that we must eat of the food and drink he offers us (his own body and blood) that we may have eternal life. Coming to him is the way to a wisdom which is beyond this world. Prudence uses the term "fool" to describe a person who can help themselves by choosing the path to wisdom but chooses otherwise. We tend to think of a "fool" as a person who can't help themselves - a person who is mentally limited, who sees things superficially. We call a person "wise" who can see beyond the obvious. We all know that wisdom involves more than innate ability; it is that. It also has to be developed through education, instruction, self-discipline and hard work. When you think of wise people, whom might you think of? I think of people like Socrates, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, musicians like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, artists like DaVinci and Michelangelo. One of the first categories of wise people who came to mind when I was thinking of people who see beyond the obvious, the inventor, there are many: Edison, Bell, Geo. Washington Carver, Whitney, Madam Curie, Gutenberg, Einstein, Jonas Salk, Galileo, Morse. I can't overlook our own former parishioner and alumnus of St. Boniface School: Dr. Thomas Fogarty. His name you will find under famous inventors alphabetically listed right above Henry Ford and Ben Franklin. I also cannot overlook some of our own parents and grandparents who might never be famous but who were sources of wisdom for us. These were all people who were not only bright but who worked hard to see what was not obvious to others and who made our life in this world better, safer, easier, healthier, more productive, more fulfilling, more beautiful.

Jesus is telling us there are some things we cannot see on our own, even some things that are

not obvious even after he tells us about it. If we allow ourselves to be guided by his word, it will make our life more wonderful and it will be forever. He invites everyone to come to him to be enlightened. Without his light our vision will be limited to what we can figure out on our own. With his light we see further – into eternity. A shortcut to this wisdom he offers us is the Eucharist.

I hardly need to explain today's gospel. It could not be more clear: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." The Eucharist is not just a one-time event, any more than eating a one time healthy meal will make us healthy. The Eucharist is a way of life by which we allow ourselves to be constantly nourished with Jesus' body and blood. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." And he "will have life because of me." Amen.

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 23, 2009

INTRODUCTION - (Joshua 24,1-2a,15-17,18b; Eph 5,21-32; John 6,60-69) 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. Husbands, when you hear today's second reading, don't start nudging your wives when you hear Paul say "wives should be subordinate to their husbands." First of all keep in mind the first sentence where Paul says to both husbands and wives: "Be subordinate to one another..." You might notice too that Paul is just as demanding (and maybe even more so) of husbands in this passage than he is of wives. Married love involves commitment and mutuality. In the end, it should resemble the love between Christ and the Church.

HOMILY - For five weeks now our gospel reading has been from the beautiful sixth chapter of St. John. The sixth chapter began with Jesus feeding a great crowd with just five loaves of bread and two fish. It developed further with Jesus telling the crowd that he had a better food he wanted to offer them, the bread of life, which was himself. We heard Jesus insist last week "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day." His listeners respond as we heard in today's gospel: "This is a hard saying, who can accept it?" and they started walking away. If anyone doubts as to whether Jesus wanted them to take him literally when he said "this is my body," this passage should take away all doubts. Jesus didn't call his followers who were leaving him to come back. He didn't say "you misunderstood me. What I said I meant symbolically." He knew they heard him clearly and they understood him perfectly. He let them go their way. He just asked the Apostles, "are you going to leave me too?"

Last week or the week before, I can't remember which, someone came up to me after Mass and said "I don't see why you are spending so much time trying to explain that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. I've never doubted it." I thought that's good that this person had such strong and simple faith. But not everyone has such unquestioned faith. A great number of us, as we mature, have all kinds of questions about faith and we are open to any support we can get that our faith is for real. That's what I tried to offer. There is a second purpose why I spent a lot of time talking about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. St. Peter tells us that we should always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks us for a reason why we have the faith and hope that we have. (1 Peter 3,15)

As I was saying Mass this week, I was inspired to reflect on why Jesus feeds us under two forms: body and blood. Wouldn't one be enough? Theologically it is. When we receive Christ under either form, we receive the living, risen, glorified body of Christ as he exists now. Jesus said last week, "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." Our union with Jesus, who is living, gives eternal life to our spirits, just as the union of a branch to the vine gives life to the branch. The consecrated bread, as it represents food, tells us the Eucharist is nourishing and life-giving, and in the Jewish mind the blood especially tells us that. In the Jewish mind life was in the blood. That's why the Jews were not allowed to drink blood. It had to be poured on the ground because life came from God and it had to return to God. Jewish dietary laws, which the Apostles carefully followed, required all Jews to drain the blood from any meat they ever ate. It must have been a real shock to the Apostles at the Last Supper when Jesus handed them the cup and said to them to drink his blood.

I have drifted away from what I started to say which was why Jesus gave himself to us under two forms: body and blood. It is meant to remind us of his death for us. As he said "This is my body which will be given for you... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you." (Lk. 22,19-20) When a person's blood is no longer in their body they are dead. When we participate in the Eucharist, we are not only reminded that Jesus died for us but we somehow are united with the saving power of Jesus' loving and perfect sacrifice of himself to the Father. As Paul tells us "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." (1 Cor 11,26) When we participate in Mass, we place our own lives on the altar, along with all the things we suffer and all the things for which we are grateful. In love we offer ourselves to the Father along with Jesus.

This may be a challenge for many people to grasp. When we believe something we cannot understand or we cannot prove, when we believe it simply because someone we trust told us, we call that faith. This was the faith Peter showed when Jesus asked the Apostles if they were going to leave. He responded: "Master, to whom shall we go?" He didn't understand what Jesus was saying any better than those who were leaving Jesus but, as he said: "We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." Sometimes Peter put his foot in his mouth, but this time he answered perfectly. It is as good an answer as we could give to anyone as to why we're here today. Amen.

Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

Aug 30, 2009

INTRODUCTION: Today's first reading takes us back about 13 centuries before Christ. God's people, after their escape from Egypt and their 40 year sojourn in the desert, are getting close to crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land. Moses was still with them and he knew he would die before they crossed the Jordan. So he had some last words instructing and encouraging God's people before his departure. In essence he is telling God's people that God loves his people and he wants them to prosper. They will do so only if they keep God's laws. This passage fits well with the second reading which tells us to be doers of the word and not hearers only and it leads into the gospel where Jesus reminds us that the essence of all law is love.

HOMILY: It's obvious that Mark was writing for Gentiles, in that he had to explain a number of Jewish customs. We all know it is a good idea to wash our hands before we eat, but in Jesus' day, failure to do so made a person a sinful person according to the Pharisees. It was not a written law found in the Bible, but a tradition. Often their traditions contradicted the written law of God and Jesus didn't hesitate to point that out to his adversaries. In today's gospel, Jesus went further than correcting the Pharisees for ignoring God's word. Jesus made an interpretation of God's Law that was among the most shocking things he said to the people of his day. He told them "nothing that enters a person from outside can defile that person;" i.e., it cannot turn them into a sinful person.

Abstinence from certain foods was required by Mosaic Law; it was a stronger mandate than a tradition of the elders such as washing hands before eating. In the concluding line in today's gospel, Jesus states that what a person eats does not make that person unholy, but it's what comes out of one's heart that makes us unholy. In effect he eliminated a long standing Old Testament Law. At the same time he reminded us that God sees in our hearts what we truly are.

Jesus, of course, spoke with divine authority when he declared all foods clean. Jesus, as far as we know, never carried out his own principle of disregarding dietary laws. His followers, however, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, under the guidance of the Spirit, applied this principle to their preaching of the gospel, especially when Gentiles started coming into the Church.

All of this may seem meaningless to us today, but it's not. We all know how important it is that we behave in a manner that is appropriate and kind. We must be "doers of the word and not hearers only," as St. James tells us in today's second reading, or we are deluding ourselves that we are pleasing to God. Here Jesus is reminding all of us that, important as our behavior is, there's something even more important: and that is what's in our heart. What should be in our heart? Love! Love for God and for each other – which Jesus tells us are the two greatest

commandments. Jesus tells us this is where his hearers went wrong. They were doing all the right things, more or less, but he tells them, quoting Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

That long list of evils that may come out of our hearts, which Jesus talks about, may make us think we're going to be in big trouble all the time. But we're not in big trouble all the time because we're not perfect all the time. We get distracted in prayers, we get angry at people sometimes and maybe feel like strangling them, we may feel greedy or envious or proud, we might allow temptations against purity to hang around for a while too long. Christ came to us, not because we're perfect, but because we need his help to please God. He will help us if we ask him. What Jesus wants to do is to fill our hearts with his love. Out of this love he desires that we love and serve God and treat one another in a kind and loving way.

Indeed, that's a big order, the job of a lifetime. Perhaps as we continue on with the Mass, we can be aware of our external actions and do them not in a mechanical sort of way, but with adoration and love for the one who loves us infinitely and eternally. Amen.