

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012

The readings of this Sunday talk about the food that God gives in order to nourish and comfort us in difficult times. They show that, without God nourishing us and supporting us, we would lose our strength and energy in our journey of life. For that reason, they invite us to long for the food that comes from God and which gives eternal life.

The first reading recalls what happened to the prophet Elijah in the desert in his flight to the Horeb Mountain as he tried to escape the threat against his life. It shows that, as he was worn down with hunger and overwhelmed with fatigue, there was nothing left for him than to wish to die. But at that moment of despair, God intervened in a very miraculous way by providing food and drink for him. Reinvigorated, he could eventually finish the journey and come to the mountain of God.

What is behind this text is the idea that life is a long journey. Along the way, there are moments of joy and success, but there are also moments of crisis and conflicting experiences. However, whatever might be the difficulties we face on a daily basis in our undertakings, God always knows how to provide for our needs so that we keep going until we obtain the goal of our life.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus presents himself to the Jews as the bread of life that came down from heaven. First of all, the Gospel states that, once Jesus did such a statement, the Jews started questioning his credibility, because they knew him and his family very well.

But, Jesus kept on insisting that no one can come to him unless his Father draws him. If such one comes to him, he will raise him on the last day. Moreover, anyone who is able to listen to his Father and learns from him will certainly come to him and believe in him.

Consequently, anyone who believes in him will have eternal life. That is the reason why he makes a contrasting comparison between the manna that the Jews ate in the desert, and died, and the living bread that comes down from heaven which gives life and which he, in fact, is.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the mystery of the identity of Jesus. It is so striking in today's Gospel to hear Jesus say that he is the bread of life that came down from heaven. And yet, his listeners were not dealing with something to eat like a candy or a biscuit, but rather with a human person and an individual whose human origin they could easily trace back to his family. That is why they were wondering why he said that, while they knew very well his mother and father.

In fact, when Jesus says that 'he is the bread of life', he means that he is more than what he merely appears. In him, the living God is present and gives life to anyone who receives him and believes in him. Between the Father and him a deep relationship exists. Because of that particular relationship linking him to the Father, God acts in him, and through him, in order to give life to the world.

In that perspective, those who look at him just externally fail to come to a full understanding of his identity. They do not understand how this carpenter is a bearer of God. By doing so, they miss the opportunity to recognize God's grace and presence in the person of Jesus.

That is why the attitude of the Jews is a warning to each one of us so that we never neglect a message from God, because we despise the one who brings it to us or we do not care about the messenger himself because of human feelings. Can we really refuse a check sent to us for the simple reason that it is not sent in a standard envelope?

Another thing that the Jews failed to understand is the truth that there are two types of hunger, namely human and spiritual. If the human hunger can be satisfied by material food, only God can satisfy the spiritual hunger of the world. Jesus is the one the Father has sent into the world in order to satisfy our spiritual hunger. As the material bread is essential to the sustenance of our body, so is the bread that Jesus gives essential for the nourishment of our souls.

The second thing I want to highlight is about the reality of Eucharist. When Jesus says that he is the bread of life, he wants us to realize that through the Eucharist, he is present among us. The Eucharistic bread stands in contrast to the manna that Moses gave to the Hebrews in the desert. Those who ate it died, while whoever eats of the bread that comes from Jesus will live forever. The bread that Jesus gives is his flesh for the life of the world.

These words of Jesus are still true today. Jesus is the bread that satisfies our spiritual hunger and renews our strength. Whoever comes to him will live forever. In order to confirm that life on us, St Paul recommends that we let ourselves be guided by his Holy Spirit. Moreover, we have to imitate God by living in love with one another.

That is why it is important that we treat others as we would like to be treated. It is not with bitterness, anger, resentment, revenge, reviling, loud talking, and insults that we can build good relationships with one another.

Finally, we have to remember that life is a long journey made up of the ups and the downs. Along this journey, we need to be strengthened by something bigger than material bread. That strength we find in the Eucharist. In this journey, Jesus comes to us as the bread of life in order to strengthen us and give us eternal life.

Today, in the Eucharist, Jesus touches us with compassion and tells us “get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you”. As we still have a long journey ahead of us, with temptations and troubles, we need a special force that can come only through the Eucharist. Let us, then, get up and eat the real food that gives the Son of God. May God bless you!

1 Kings 19: 4-8; Ephesians 4: 30-5:2; John 6: 41-51



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