

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2015

The readings of this Sunday talk about the divine sustenance. They show that, in a miraculous way, God nourishes us and strengthens us in the difficult 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 the flight of the prophet Elijah and the consolation he received from God who provided him with food. It shows in particular God's intervention in his life by the hand of his angel at the time he was desperate and worn out by hunger and fatigue. They invite us to entrust our hardships to God so that he may alleviate them.

What is behind this text is the idea that life is a long journey made up of joyful and conflicting experiences. There is also the idea that in time of adversity, God provides for the needs of his beloved ones so that they keep going until they reach the goal of their life.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus introduces himself as the bread of life. First of all, the Gospel starts with the reaction of the Jews who object to Jesus' statement that he comes from heaven. Then, it talks about Jesus' answer to them by claiming that whoever comes to him, he will raise on the last day.

After that, Jesus gives another statement in which he claims that whoever listens to his Father comes to him and whoever believes in him has eternal life. The Gospel ends up with Jesus re-affirming that, unlike the Jews' ancestors who ate the manna, but died, he is the bread of life that came down from heaven in order to give life and the bread he gives is his flesh for the life of the world.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the need for divine sustenance along the difficult journey of life. In fact, life is a long journey; it is made of ups and downs, sun and clouds, rain and snow, heat and cold, joys and tears, happiness and sadness, etc. Each step in this journey is demanding, as it requires of us courage, perseverance and sometimes sacrifices.

Because life is a long journey, we certainly need to be in good shape and strong enough in order to get where we are going and to finish the walk. If I could use ordinary language, I would say that in order to be in good shape and strong, the first thing that is needed is to eat well, otherwise we will be weak and incapable of finishing the journey.

It is here that the Gospel speaks to us in a very particular way. In fact, the body needs to be fed so that it might be capable of remaining in good shape. However, if it happens that the body does not have enough food, the result will be malnutrition, which is a deficiency. If, on the other hand, it happens that the body eats all types of wrong food, like in the case of "junk food", the result then will be overweight, which is also a deficiency. Consequently, the good shape of a body depends on how one nourishes oneself with adequate and nutritious food.

But, a human being has not only a body, he also has a soul. The mechanism that leads to the good maintenance of the body is almost the same when it comes to the soul, but at the spiritual level. Just as a person can be overweight and still have a severe vitamin deficiency, so people can be satisfied materially but be dying spiritually.

That is why we have to understand that, besides our material food, we still need to be fed by the Lord in order to continue the journey until the day we will come in the presence of God. In other words, as the material bread is essential for the sustenance of our body, so is the bread that Jesus gives essential for the nourishment of our souls.

Such a vision makes clear why the Eucharist is important for us who believe in Jesus. As Jesus himself says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world".

When Jesus says so, he wants to draw our attention to the fact that the Eucharist is nourishment that spiritually feeds us along the journey of life. The Eucharistic bread and wine are, then, mysterious signs of Christ's presence among us through which he feeds us. They are food for our journey to the mountain where we hope to meet God.

The Eucharistic bread stands in contrast to the manna that Moses gave to the Hebrews in the desert. All the Israelites who ate the manna in the desert died. But, 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 to the Jews are still true today, even if there are people who do not accept them. Jesus is the bread that satisfies our spiritual hunger and renews our strength. Whoever comes to him and recognizes in him the revelation of the will of the Father, will live forever. Whoever comes to him will have eternal life.

As it was for the prophet Elijah who was strengthened by the food brought to him by the angel, so is Jesus touching us in the Eucharist and telling with compassion: "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 the Son of God gives. May God bless you all!

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



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