



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration
The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 12, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

Last week, we heard about the grumbling Israelites complaining to Moses as they made their way through the desert. They were so miserable with hunger, they told Moses that they would prefer death to their present hardships. When they complained, God provided food for them. He gave them manna so they could continue their journey to the place God had promised to them.

Today, we hear of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had killed the prophets of King Ahab's false god, then fled when the queen swore to kill him. With a long journey ahead, and a heavy sense of failure, a weary Elijah prayed for death. Twice while he slept, an angel awakened Elijah with food and drink for him. This revived and strengthened Elijah so he could continue on his journey to Mount Horeb where he would encounter God and receive further instructions.

Today's Gospel continues Jesus' discussion with the crowds who sought him since he miraculously fed thousands with a small amount of bread and fish. The people thought Jesus might be a prophet, or their promised Messiah-king. They compared what Jesus had done with what their ancestors experienced when they were given manna in the desert.

Jesus wanted them to understand that he has not come to relieve their bodily hunger. However miraculous manna seemed to them, their ancestors still died after eating it. Jesus told the people that he is living bread from heaven: those who believe in him will never die.

The Old Testament is full of stories that remind us that God has always provided for and saved his people. Today's Psalm praises God for his goodness and his care. These readings prefigure what God has promised to do through Jesus. In Jesus, God does not simply act to sustain the earthly lives of his people: he has planned a way to restore them to eternal life. God sent Jesus to make this possible.

The people who heard these words of Jesus struggled to grasp what he meant about being living bread and giving his flesh for the life of the world. When they saw him, they saw a human being, Joseph's son. Jesus wanted them to stop trying to understand him from a human perspective; he was trying to teach them about things they could not see. He assured them that God himself was drawing them to him, so he could show them the way to eternal life. Two millennia later, Jesus' words continue to confound and challenge all who hear them, yet he remains the living bread at the heart of every Eucharist, inviting all to find in him life that will last forever.

Sunday Readings and Background

Reading I: 1 Kings 19:4-8

The angel of the Lord came back to him.

- Elijah, discouraged and fearing for his life, flees into the desert and prays for death.
- God's answer to his prayer echoes the Exodus and desert experience of Israel.
- Though he is discouraged and desperate when he flees into the desert, Elijah is transformed by the bread and water sent from God.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 34: 2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II: Ephesians 4:30-5:2

Live in love.

- Today's passage describes the undeniable love that Christ has shown.
- Paul reminds the Ephesians that they share in new life with God.
- Christ gave his life for love of us; we must in turn show love to our neighbor.

Gospel: John 6:41-51

No one can come to me unless my Father draws him or her.

- Those who hear Jesus describe himself as "bread from heaven," murmur about Jesus being the Bread of Life.
- This echoes Israel murmuring in the desert about food and water and leadership.
- The difference between manna and Jesus is that those who ate the manna died, but those who eat the Bread of Life will live forever.

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Taste and See

Search your prayer books, meditate on all 20 mysteries of the rosary and comb through novenas and chaplets. Nowhere will you find the suggestion that you pray like Elijah does in today's first reading. He was basically telling God, "Enough! I've had it! Just let me lie down and die! Here and now!"

The fact that spiritual tomes don't copy that prayer for us to memorize or create hymns from it doesn't diminish the crystal quality of its honesty or the witness it bears to the profound relationship Elijah maintained with the God who had called him into a life of prophecy. When we find the "Thy will be done," of the Lord's Prayer too hard to pray, perhaps we can echo Elijah's cry and trust that God hears that prayer with compassion.

After praying, Elijah lay down, perhaps hoping never to awaken. But God's lovers don't get off so easily. Elijah had hardly gotten into deep sleep before God's messenger shook him awake and told him to eat. When Elijah tried to return to the sleep of the just, the angel told him to finish off the provisions God had sent because he needed energy for the road ahead. That long road would first take Elijah to Mount Horeb where God would appear to him. Later, it led him to where he would anoint Elisha as his successor and finally to where he would be carried off to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). According to the story, the one thing God did not do for Elijah was allow him to die.

Elijah's story seems to teach that God listens to the prayers of the beloved and answers by beckoning them toward all that life can offer. This is the message Jesus tried to convey to his companions as he described himself as the bread that comes from heaven. According to Jesus, the bread from heaven was God's offer of life more abundant than they could imagine. The people who murmured, denigrating him as nothing more than the son of their neighbors, were prisoners of their own measly expectations. They wouldn't fathom the idea that

God could work through one of them — much less that their small lives could ever be worth stretching into eternity. Their refusal to accept Jesus as coming from God betrayed their lack of faith in the value and potential of their own lives and consequently their lack of faith in the God who formed them as a people in the divine image.

Jesus told his people that no one could come to him unless drawn by the Father. He wanted them to realize that the only way to understand him was to allow themselves to be in touch with their deepest human longings, the dimension of themselves which yearns for and leads to God. St. Augustine prayed in gratitude for this capacity to be open to God with the words, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Jesus' call to those who would hear him was the most open invitation he could make. In effect he was saying, "Allow yourselves to be in touch with God's spirit within you and you will realize that I am offering you living bread, my very life which brings eternal life to the world."

The Scriptures we hear this week try to awaken us to what God is offering us. Elijah is here to lead us in the kind of sincere prayer that makes us vulnerable to God's unlimited offers. The memory of the people who murmured against Jesus in the synagogue warns us against mortally diminished hopes and venial expectations. Together they urge us to allow our hearts' longing for God to lead us to receive the life God desires to share with us.

