



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 19, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

Today's Gospel proclaims the last part of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. Jesus is trying to communicate a profound idea: how he will transform finite, human life into the same eternal life he shares with God the Father. Theologian Father Raymond Brown explained that the heavenly-human Jesus often used human metaphors to communicate heavenly realities. Using language that people could understand gave people the best chance to grasp what he was saying. Everyone knows that food and drink are essential for life, so when Jesus discloses that he has been sent by God to give life, he describes himself as living bread. Whoever eats this bread will share in his and the Father's life, and will live forever.

Jesus goes even further to say that his flesh is true food and his blood, true drink. Such an idea cannot be grasped with human understanding. Jesus does not explain how this can be so, nor does he answer the questions that arise from such words. Even when his words disturb or confound those who hear them, Jesus repeats them because they are so important: He is the living bread that God sent from heaven. Those who eat the bread that he offers will share his life and live forever.

In today's first reading from Proverbs, Wisdom has prepared a banquet and invites all to come and partake. Wisdom invites everyone to share her feast, even those who are simple and lack understanding. Those who accept her invitation find life.

The Hebrew people believed that wisdom, often personified as a woman, revealed something of the nature and plans of God. Many in the early Church saw this reading as a prefigurement of the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, Jesus invites us to a life-giving banquet. He himself is the food and drink. Those who partake are sustained for the present and preserved for eternity. We do not need to understand how bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. We only have to take Jesus at his word: "whoever believes has eternal life" (Jn 6: 47).

Today's remaining two readings suggest a fitting response to the gifts that Jesus offers. St. Paul advised the Christians at Ephesus to live carefully and wisely, to seek God's will, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Those who have, in the words of today's Psalm, tasted and seen the goodness of God in Jesus, should "give thanks always and for everything."

I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall be ever in my mouth.

Sunday Readings and Background

Reading I: Proverbs 9:1-6

Come, eat of the food I have prepared.

- The Book of Proverbs offers an invitation to Wisdom's banquet.
- The consequences of accepting foolishness or wisdom are vastly different.
- Eating with Folly leads inevitable to death, while sharing Wisdom's meal is a guarantee of life.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 34: 2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II: Ephesians 5:15-20

Be filled with the Spirit!

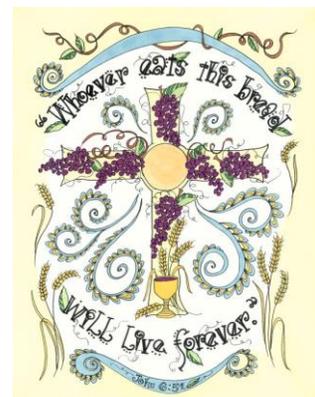
- Like the first reading, the Letter to the Ephesians presents the contrast between wisdom and folly.
- Paul stresses the need to live wisely.
- Today's passage reminds us to praise God for the gift of Salvation that has already been given to us.

Gospel: John 6:51-58

I am the living bread.

- The Gospel describes Jesus' invitation to the banquet at which the food shared is his flesh and blood.
- The Jews quarreled among themselves because Jesus' suggestion to eat his flesh and drink his blood seemed to disregard Jewish law.
- Jesus implies a real sharing of his flesh and blood as food, for eternal life.

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God in the Flesh

“I am the living bread ... the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” John tells us that as soon as Jesus finished saying that the people in the synagogue got into serious arguments with one another — a sign that he had hit a nerve and that their opinions were fiercely divided. Just what was Jesus trying to tell people that got them so upset?

Although the most literal, small-minded critics in the crowd focused on the yuck factor of drinking blood, the really serious critics were those who understood just what Jesus was saying and protested his audacity or marveled at its implications. As we continue to read Chapter 6 of John, it might help to imagine it as a dramatic presentation in which the Passover and the Exodus form the background scenery. Those who listened carefully to Jesus understood that he was presenting himself as God’s gift in their day just as surely as the manna had been God’s gift for their ancestors in the wilderness. They caught the full impact of his implication that he was there in flesh and blood to save them more completely than the paschal lamb and its blood had saved their ancestors on the night of the Passover. They realized that he was saying that union with him was the way to eternal life.

Trying to comprehend Jesus’ explanations of bread, flesh and blood with contemporary scientific categories is like memorizing French vocabulary to improve your grasp of Chinese. Jesus was speaking the language of heart and soul, not chemistry and physics. Jesus himself gave us the best explanation in a very similar discourse at the Last Supper when he said, “I am the vine and you are the branches” (John 15:1-8). In both discourses, Jesus bids his followers to allow his life to flow through them by using metaphors of the most intimate connection possible. When he presents himself as bread, flesh and blood for the eating, the invitation is to receive and take him in such that his very life becomes our own. With the image of vine and branches, the connection is even more intimate because the branch grows out of the vine.

Sacramental theology teaches about the transformation of bread and wine, but Jesus points us beyond concentration on those elements. Jesus speaks of flesh and blood as the medium of his presence. According to Jesus, the reason he took flesh and blood was to be like the vine which gives life. He is present to transform everyone “who feeds on me” so that they will live forever. Jesus was claiming to be the meeting point between the Father and humanity. That meant that taking him

in was the way to eternal life and, to such a transformation that those who accepted him would become his branches, they would share his life as truly as he shared the life of the Father.

Jesus’ message could have seriously upset people from two very different perspectives. First of all, the guardians of orthodoxy bent on protecting or defending the holiness of God were convinced they were hearing blasphemy. Jesus’ teachings presented God as all too immanent, all too tangible, in a word, all too incarnate. People on the other end of the spectrum recognized the immeasurable potential and overwhelming responsibility Jesus’ teaching implied. Worship would never get them off the hook if they were called to live the love of God to the degree that Jesus was suggesting. Jesus said as much when he told the disciples, “live in my love,” or more pointedly, “Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do and ... greater.”

This Sunday’s Gospel, like the reading from Proverbs about Lady Wisdom’s banquet, doesn’t really come to a conclusion. In our selection from Proverbs, Lady Wisdom’s last words invite her guests to advance in the way of understanding. Jesus’ last words in today’s Gospel offer the invitation to live forever. It’s as though after five weeks of pondering the mystery of Jesus the bread of life, we are still not adequately prepared to come to a conclusion. John the Evangelist keeps us circling around this theme because we cannot easily fathom its depth. We need to see this mystery from a variety of perspectives in order to realize how limited our vision really is.

Next week’s Liturgy of the Word will call us to make a choice about our faith and what we will allow it to demand of us. For this week, the Scriptures call us to circle round, to ponder what Jesus said and what he meant, and to allow his words to disturb us as they perturbed his companions at Capernaum.

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