

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B

August 12, 2018

First Reading – 1 Kings 19:4-8

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 34

Second Reading – Ephesians 4:30-5:2

Gospel – John 6:41-51

My dear people of God:

Today, on the nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we will continue reading John's Gospel about the reaction of the Jews to the declaration of Jesus as the Bread from Heaven.

But first, let us reflect on the mission of Elijah, which was sustained by the bread given by Yahweh through an angel. It would be beneficial for us to know a little about Elijah and the context of our first reading.

Ahab succeeded his father Omri, a king who reigned for twelve years. Omri *“did that which was evil in the sight of Yahweh”*. (1 Kings 16:23). Ahab, like his father Omri, *“did that which was evil in the sight of Yahweh”* (1Kings 16:30). Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidonians. Jezebel was an aggressive woman who advocated for the worship of Baal and who killed anybody who opposed her.

Ahab worshipped Baal. This angered Yahweh. Elijah warned Ahab of bitter consequences for his infidelity to Yahweh. A long drought was foretold. Elijah challenged Ahab and the prophets of Baal to choose a bull and call on their god to bring fire to burn the bull offering in Mount Carmel. Elijah would do the same, calling on Yahweh. Then they would see which god was real. They did that, and Yahweh proved Himself to be the REAL and TRUE GOD on Mount Carmel by consuming Elijah's offering. Then Elijah ordered the people to seize all the prophets of Baal. He killed them by slitting their throats (1Kings 18:19-40).

After that, Elijah announced to Ahab about the coming of the rain (verses 41-46). Ahab went to Jezreel and told Jezebel that Elijah killed all the prophets of Baal. Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying: *“Let the gods kill me, if I don’t kill you by tomorrow about this time!”*

Elijah fled for his life and went to Beer-sheba, 95 miles south of Jezreel: away from Jezebel, without leaving the historic Promised Land. Beer-sheba belongs to Judah and is outside Ahab’s jurisdiction.

My dear people of God, this is where we started our First Reading today: Verse 4 tells us that Elijah went on a day’s journey and rested under a broom tree and prayed for death: *“O Yahweh, take away my life.”* The broom tree is a large shrub or small tree that grows in Sinai, attains a height of about 10 feet, and would provide a bit of welcome shade in that hot climate.

We might be surprised that Elijah, who so recently acted so decisively in behalf of Yahweh at Mount Carmel, slew Baal’s prophets, and now was so easily intimidated by Jezebel’s threat. It seems totally out of character for this courageous and resolute prophet to run.

Brothers and sisters, when we examine our own lives, we find that we, too, have moments when our faith is strong, and our actions are unwavering. But those moments can be followed by moments in which we succumb to temptation or despair. It is, sadly, our own human story. We know by experience that our moods are profoundly affected by our physical state (fatigue, hunger, thirst, heat, cold).

Elijah fled Jezebel to save his life, but he now asks Yahweh to let him die. Now his fatigue feeds his despair. But God came to his rescue. Elijah falls asleep in the shade of the broom tree. This is not the first time that Elijah has experienced a miraculous meal. Ravens brought him food at the Wadi Cherith (1Kings 17:6) and the widow of Zarephath fed him from a jar of meal that was not emptied and a jug of oil that never failed till the first rains came (1 Kings 17:8-16).

Now, let us go to the Second Reading: *“Grieve not the Holy Spirit”*. Do not act toward the Holy Spirit in a manner which would produce pain in the heart of a friend who loves you. Bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, reviling, and all malice certainly would hurt the Holy Spirit. Evil talks are opposed to the holy nature

of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the Christian. The utterance of evil or worthless words is repugnant to the holiness of the Holy Spirit. Please realize that the injunction is made the more solemn by the designation of the Spirit as “the Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of God”. The name is given with unusual fullness, in order to show the magnitude of the sin - the “HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD” The Spirit is grieved when His work is obstructed, when sin is trifled with, when Deity is treated carelessly, and when obedience is given to the devil. Paul here depicts the Holy Spirit as capable of feeling.

If to grieve a parent heedlessly is a great sin; imagine how worse would it be to grieve the Spirit of God, in whom we were sealed unto the day of redemption? Now, let us go to the Gospel. The Jews murmured against Jesus in John, chapter 6, verse 41. In this Gospel story, the phrase, “the Jews,” refers to Jews in Capernaum (John 6: 24-25), that is, the Galilean religious leaders.

They “murmured”. Please know that this is the same word used in the first reading of last Sunday when the Israelites complained about God’s apparent failure to provide food for them in the wilderness in Book of Exodus, chapter 16, verse 2). They even forgot that they were now a free people: free from the clutches of Pharaoh. The Galilean religious leaders in Capernaum are complaining about Jesus’ claim to be the “*bread of life*”. These critics of Jesus manifest the same lack of faith as the critics of Moses (and God) so many centuries earlier.

“Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” (verse 42). Jesus is in Galilee - in the city of Capernaum, His home as an adult (distinct from His native place which is Nazareth (Matthew 4:13). The local folks can hardly contain themselves when Jesus claimed to be the “*bread of life*” (verse 35) who has “*come down from heaven*” (verse 38). They know His father and mother (verse 42) and think of Him as just another local boy.

“Don’t murmur among yourselves” (verse 43). Jesus does not address the Jews’ murmurings directly. He simply tells them not to complain. But then He continues His discourse in an even more provocative tone - one that even His disciples find difficult to accept (verses 60-66). “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*” (verse 44a). This fits with His earlier words, “*All those whom the Father gives me will come to me*” (verse 37) to show that salvation depends on God’s initiative. “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*”. The word, “draws” means that God has the power to draw people to Himself.

And Jesus adds: ***“and I will raise him up in the last day”*** (verse 44b). This is the great promise: Jesus promises resurrection to believers. ***“It is written in the prophets, ‘They will all be taught by God’”*** (verse 45). The quotation paraphrases Isaiah 54:13, where the prophet assures the people of Jerusalem, newly returned from the Babylonian exile, that God will instruct their children.

The word **“all”** is important. The time will come when the church will be open to Jews and Gentiles alike, but that time had not yet come. This verse will give us a peek into that future - when **“all”** will be welcomed into God’s kingdom. The operative principle is that **“all will be taught by God”** (verse 45a), and those who learn will come to Jesus (verse 45).

“Not that anyone has seen the Father, except he who is from God. He has seen the Father” (verse 46). Jesus here pushes His Divine origin to the Jews. Exodus tells about Moses hiding his face, because he was afraid to look at God (Exodus 3:6). Moses was permitted to see God’s back but not God’s face (Exodus 33:22-23).

Brothers and sisters, the Jews of old believed that looking on God’s holiness was too much for mortals; one would die if one saw God’s face. It is different, however, for the Jesus, the Word, who was in the beginning with God, and was God (John 1:1). This ***“Word became flesh and lived among us”*** (John 1:14). Now, Jesus is pushing further His claim of divinity: ***“Amen, amen, I say to you, he who believes in me has eternal life”*** (verse 47).

Jesus has emphasized the role of the Father’s initiative in salvation (verses 44-46), but now He emphasizes the indispensable role of the believer. Even though the Father **draws** (verse 44) and **teaches** (verses 45 & 46), the **drawing and teaching require a believing response**. The reward of belief is eternal life (verse 47).

In this gospel, eternal life is a quality of life that we possess in the present (John 3:36a) and will possess even more fully in the future. Let us recall that in His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus defines eternal life in terms of relationship with the Father and the Son: ***“This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and him whom you sent, Jesus Christ”*** (John 17:3). Eternal life is the opposite of eternal condemnation (John 3:14-18; 5:29); a life free from death (John 6:50-51; 10:28).

Jesus reiterates, ***“I am the bread of life”*** (verse 48) and contrasts this bread with the manna eaten by the Israelites in the wilderness (verse 49).

The people spoke of ***“our ancestors”*** in verse 31, but Jesus speaks of **“your ancestors”** (verse 49), drawing a distinction between Himself and these people. ***“This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, that anyone may eat of it and not die”*** (verse 50). Jesus contrasts the bread that He offers, which leads to eternal life, with the bread of their ancestors, who died in the wilderness without having seen the Promised Land. Jesus promises that those who eat of the spiritual bread that He offers will never die. ***“I am the living bread which came down out of heaven”*** (verse 51a). This “living bread” parallels the “living water” that Jesus offered the Samaritan woman (John 4:10).

“Yes, the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”. This is sacrificial language - the gift of one’s flesh is the greatest and most personal of all sacrifices. In this instance, Jesus makes his sacrifice in behalf of the world; not just Israel. His sacrifice is both voluntary and vicarious. The sacrificial language recalls John the Baptist’s earlier reference to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)—which, in turn, brings to mind the Passover lamb, sacrificed for the lives of the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 11-12).

It also recalls the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, who “bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).

The word, “flesh” used in verse 51, is more graphic than “body” which is used in the accounts of the Lord’s Supper. It has some eucharistic overtones.

Brothers and sisters: this is the Eucharist we are celebrating now. The Lamb of God will take away our sins. I pray that we may put the highest appreciation towards the Mass and may we render the highest worship to this Sacrament always. Amen.