

19th Sunday of Year

Today's readings invite us to reflect more deeply on the Eucharist as the Bread of Life. Last week Our Lord explained how he is the true bread that has come down from heaven – the manna given to the Israelites in the desert was simply a foreshadowing of this. In the section we hear today the Lord makes three points: only the one who has come from God has seen the Father; those who eat the living bread will live for ever; this bread is “my flesh for the life of the world”.

It is spiritual food given to sustain us. However, God gives us this food with a specific purpose in mind. We are on a journey. Life is not just a brief sojourn on earth. Its purpose is not simply a time on earth to be enjoyed, or for doing good, or even to be filled with love not simply for others but for God himself. Although our mortal bodies are frail and our time on earth limited, our spiritual nature or soul is immortal. We are destined to live for ever. However, as human beings we tend to think in the short term and short term objectives and aspirations can lead us to lose sight of our long term goal.

In our first reading Elijah is depressed. His message is being ignored. Life is not worth living. However, God has not finished with him. He sends an angel to encourage him and to make him eat and drink. Although Elijah does not yet know this, after forty days' journey he will encounter God on Mount Horeb – the still small voice of a whispering breeze – the Holy Spirit. Had he given up at this point he would not have fulfilled his destiny. He needs food to sustain him and a sense of destiny – a purpose to fulfil.

Our Lord holds out to us the same vision. We are to live for ever. He will introduce us to his heavenly Father. This is our destiny through the grace of God. God our Father has chosen us and adopted us as his sons and daughters through baptism. He draws us to him through Jesus, his beloved Son and Jesus will raise us to life on the last day. To reach this ultimate fulfilment we must come to Jesus and learn from him. We must believe in him and follow him in our daily choices and way of life. If we stumble and fall or trail behind, we must get up and try again. The sacrament of penance means that there is no permanent disqualification. We can only frustrate God's purpose by turning our back on the finishing line and abandoning the race. The Bread of Life sustains us spiritually not only because Christ himself comes to us, but because it is a pledge and foretaste of the life to come.

The risen Christ, reigning in heaven at the right hand of the Father, comes to us not simply through outward symbols but in reality, body and blood, soul and divinity. His flesh – body and blood – become part of us. From earliest times the Christian community had to counter pagan claims that they were cannibals, as we know from a letter written by Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, to the Emperor Trajan in 112 AD. Writing in the middle of the Second century, St Justin Martyr says: “For not as common bread or common drink do we receive these things but just as our Saviour Jesus Christ, being Incarnate through the word of God, took both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too we have been taught that the food over which thanks have been given through a word of prayer which is from him, from which our blood and flesh are fed by transformation, is both the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.” From the outset the Church has taken at face value the words that Jesus speaks through the priest over the bread and wine, “This is my body...this is my blood.” And St. Ambrose says about this conversion: “Be convinced that this is not what nature has formed, but what the blessing has consecrated. The power of the blessing prevails over that of nature, because by the blessing nature itself is changed.... Could not Christ's word, which can make from nothing what did not exist, change existing things into what they were not before? It is no less a feat to give things their original nature than to change their nature. “

Jesus present in a sacramental way is transformed within us into sanctifying grace that makes us holy and unites us to the Father for as long as we remain free from sin. It is a sign and foretaste of the union with God to come in a permanent way at the end of our lives – a life to be shared with all the saints who have gone before us. They surround us as an unseen crowd helping us by their prayers and example until we join them in our heavenly home.