

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time + 11 August 2024 + I Kgs 19 + Eph 4 + Jn 6:41-51

Two weeks ago, we heard in our Gospel how Jesus multiplied 5 barley loaves and 2 fish so as to feed over 5,000 people. And then in last week's Gospel, we heard Jesus interpret His own miracle. He explained to the people that He did not multiply the bread simply to feed their stomachs. Rather, He was performing a sign, helping the People to see that His Father in heaven would provide them with *true bread from heaven*. And then Jesus explains this very bold claim: *I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, He says, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.*

Today's Gospel picks up with the Jews' skeptical reaction to Jesus' claim to be the *bread of life*, and so Jesus uses the history of their ancestors to explain himself. In fact, it is nearly impossible to understand John chapter 6 without knowing its Old Testament context. So let's look back for a moment.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses and his brother Aaron lead the Israelite people out from their slavery in Egypt, by the power of God. But the journey proves to be very difficult. The route was mostly by way of the desert, and the people soon grow bitterly hungry. Hungry people are not pleasant to be around! In the Book of Exodus we hear how they *murmured against Moses and Aaron...and said to them...you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger*. Notice that word "*murmur*." This is the same word that we heard in our Gospel today when St. John notes, *the Jews murmured about Jesus because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven, to which Jesus replies, stop murmuring among yourselves.* History, it seems, is repeating itself.

And to make this connection absolutely clear, Jesus further tells the people, *your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die*. And so Jesus is basically saying to the people: *"look, just as the LORD fed your ancestors' bodies with miraculous bread from heaven, I too can multiply bread and feed your bodies. But I'm not going to stop there. I'm going to feed your souls with my very self, if only you have faith in me!"*

Now, there is another word we need to look at in order to further understand what Jesus is revealing in today's Gospel. This time, the word is "*flesh*." St. John's Gospel is unique in that it does not record the birth and infancy of Jesus, as in Matthew and Luke. Instead, the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of John speaks of the pre-existence of the Word before time began—that is, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Most Holy Trinity—and how that same Word of God *became flesh and dwelt among us*. And here we have the incredible claim of Christianity: that God has taken on a human nature, and, to translate the verse literally, has *pitched His tent among us*. God has become man in Jesus Christ.

And this belief is also a scandal—a stumbling block—for so many people, who just cannot believe that, even if there is a God, that He would do such a thing as to become one of us. So why is that so hard to believe? Well, I think the answer is not what we might expect. Because if God has truly taken on a human nature and become a man, then that means we cannot ignore Him. We cannot be content just letting Him be some distant God up in heaven that does His thing while we do our thing here on earth. Rather, it means that He is radically close to us; too close, perhaps, for comfort. No other religion has ever dared make such a claim!

But you know, we as Catholics do not stop at the Incarnation. And we do not stop there because Jesus did not stop at the Incarnation either. Jesus says in our Gospel today: *the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world*. This means that the very same flesh that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Holy Trinity took on, is not just simply *flesh for Himself*, but is rather *flesh for us*—flesh given *for* the life of the world! This means that God became man so as to give His life for us!

This is what St. Paul is talking about in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, when he says *Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God*. At its heart, the sacrifice of Jesus was a sacrifice of love to the Father, on our behalf, so as to undo our disobedience, our sin. And this is why we call it the “Holy Sacrifice of the Mass”; because it is here that we eat the flesh of Jesus, given for the life of the world, so that our sins can be forgiven, and we can be reunited with our heavenly Father. When we hear the words *This is my body, which will be given up for you...this is the chalice of my blood...which will be poured out for you*, it should take our breath away!

And so we are spending so much time on John chapter 6 because it strikes to the very heart of our faith: that is, the Son of God has emptied Himself of His glory so as to become one of us, and die upon the cross. But Jesus willingly died because He loves each and every irreplaceable human person ever to walk the face of this earth so much, that He wants us to be with Him and the Father, not only in heaven, but even now. And so He gives us Himself in the Eucharist as a pledge and sign of this love, so that *whoever eats this bread will live forever*. That is our Catholic faith!

I'd like to conclude with a quick thought on our 1<sup>st</sup> reading today. I don't know about you, but I sometimes struggle these days with the way our society seems to be moving so fast, and so almost gleefully, away from God. In face of such grave evil, it can be tempting to take on the feelings of Elijah and say: *Lord take me now, because this is not a world I want to be a part of anymore!* But this is not an option for us; we are here as long as the Lord wills it. The angel tells Elijah and all of us today, *Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!* The Eucharist is our nourishment and strength to keep fighting the good fight, as all of us must do.