

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 11 August 2024 + I Kgs 19 + Eph 4 + Jn 6:41-51

Today is the 4th week of our 5 week-long journey through John ch. 6, the so-called “Bread of Life” discourse. Each week, we have heard Jesus make bolder and bolder claims. He began with a pretty awesome attention getter: He multiplies 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish so to feed over 5,000 men. He then reveals that He fed the people to help them discover a deeper hunger. He says, *I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.*

Then He ramps things up even more. He tells the people that not only is He the fulfillment of all of their desires, but He claims: *I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.* And now today, He doubles down on this claim: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.*

As a preview of coming attractions, we will hear next weekend in the conclusion of John 6 that this is just too much for the people. To the ears of 1st century Jews, these words of Jesus were somewhere between heresy and blasphemy, on at least four accounts: 1. Jesus is claiming to be from heaven, and God is His Father. 2. He is claiming that His bread is greater than Moses’ Manna in the desert. 3. He seems to be contradicting the Mosaic Law, which forbade eating the flesh of an animal along with drinking its blood. And 4. He seems to be proposing some sort of cannibalism. It’s no wonder that the people take offense at this point. So what are we to make of all of this? Well, let’s look at each of these difficulties in the light of our faith.

First, Jesus is claiming to be from heaven, that God is His Father. We are so blessed, because we have 2 incredible gifts that Jesus’ contemporaries did not have: the New Testament, and our Catholic Tradition. We have 4 detailed accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, faithfully handed on to us in the Gospels by the Church. The Gospels are not just nice stories or fables or a list of do’s and don’ts. St. John concludes his Gospel by stating clearly why he and the other evangelists went to so much work to create an account of the life of Christ. He says, *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of [his] disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name (20:30-31).* That is the whole purpose of the Gospels: to give us reasons to believe that Jesus is the Son of God!

Next, Jesus’ claim that His bread is greater than the Manna. The reason it is greater, He says, is because the people ate the Manna, and it kept them alive in the desert. But like all earthly food, it only sustained them for a time. They still died eventually.

But the bread that the Lord will give nourishes us always, giving us eternal life. Now again, we are blessed, because we know what the people at that time did not: Jesus really would give His *flesh for the life of the world* on the Cross. He would truly die in the flesh, but that same flesh would be raised 3 days later: immortal, and glorious.

And that brings us to the 3rd and 4th difficulties: that whoever eats the flesh of Christ will live forever. The people wonder, isn't this unlawful, isn't it cannibalism? Incidentally, this is the same charge (cannibalism) that the pagans made against the first Christians, proving that the Church has always believed in the real presence since the very beginning. But our Gospel account today is prior to the Last Supper, so we can understand the peoples' revulsion. They do not yet know that the way the Lord will make for us to eat His flesh and drink His blood, is under Sacramental signs: under the appearances of bread and wine. And that by doing so, we become *one body* with Him: one body with the Lord who rose from the dead *in the flesh*, never to die again. So even though we will die someday in the flesh, if we are united with Him, not only will our souls be with Him, but our bodies too will be resurrected into glorified bodies on the last day, and will reign with Him forever.

So how do our other readings today fit into this picture? Well, in our 1st reading from Proverbs, the Church is pointing out that all of this business of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Lord so as to receive eternal life, probably seems like utter *foolishness* to those without faith; to those who do not perceive the amazing, mysterious—that is, *Sacramental* way in which the Lord invites us: *Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!* That the Eucharist is the way in which we can proclaim with the Psalmist: *taste and see the goodness of the Lord!*

And our 2nd reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians makes a similar point. That the Lord is providing for us the most satisfying banquet we can ever imagine. And yet, we know tragically, so many people choose to stay away. They look for satisfaction from earthly food and drink, often filling their bodies to excess, and yet are never satisfied. The foolish would rather *get drunk on wine*—on earthly spirits that never leads to anything good, than to be filled with Holy Spirit—the wellspring that leads to eternal life! The word *Eucharist* means thanksgiving, so it is right and just for us to be here, *singing...and giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.*

Now admittedly, all of this takes great faith. If we only listen to our bodies, we always want more of the fruits of the earth. But if we are still, if we pray, and listen to our souls, we realize we want two things more than anything in life: perfect love, and eternal life. This is what the Lord gives us in the Eucharist: *this is my body, this is my blood, given for you. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.*