

The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 19:4-8
<i>Response</i>	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 4:30-5:2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord; whoever eats this bread will live forever.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:41-51

The 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of John, chapter 6. Although we're in the Year B, which is the year of St. Mark's Gospel — as we've been seeing here — the Church takes something of a break from the Gospel of Mark and focuses our attention on the Gospel of St. John chapter 6 for five Sundays in a row. This is the third Sunday that we're focusing on John 6, and now we're actually moving into the “Bread of Life” discourse proper. And, we looked at Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 two Sundays ago, and then last Sunday we looked at some of the exchange between Jesus and the crowds that led to his “Bread of Life” discourse when they asked him to give them the new manna forever always. Now, we're actually looking at what he has to say about this new manna, about this bread from heaven. Now he's beginning to use the manna to reveal two mysteries: the mystery of his divinity, of his heavenly origin as the bread of life come in person, and also the mystery of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the mystery of his real presence in the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper.

So let's without any further adieu turn back to John chapter 6. Today, the Gospel is from verses 41 through 51:

The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."¹

Alright, so what's going on in this particular Gospel? Well, in this case we're getting into the heart of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. And, it's a little unfortunate that the verses are selected in the way they are, because it obscures the structure of the discourse from John's Gospel. If you read through John 6 in its entirety, and not in just the selected verses given to us in the lectionary, what you will see is that there are two parts to Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. We looked at the beginning of the first part last Sunday and it picks up in the middle of the first part this Sunday, but the two parts can be broken down as follows: the first part begins in John

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

6:35 when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger; he who believes in me shall never thirst.” In that first part of the Bread of Life discourse, which starts in verse 35 and then goes all the way down to verse 47, Jesus uses the manna from heaven as a metaphor for his own divinity — as a symbol, a kind of a sign of the fact that just like the manna was heavenly in origin, so too Jesus is heavenly in origin. He as the Bread of Life has come down from heaven. In other words, he has become incarnate; he is the God who has become man. So, the first part of the discourse is really focusing on Jesus' divinity, and you can see also emphasis on the word “faith” or “believe” — *pisteuō* in Greek. So, before Jesus gets into talking about the sacrament of the Eucharist or eating his flesh, the first thing he says is, “I want you to believe that I have come down from heaven.” That's very important because before you can understand the mystery of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist you have to first understand that he is God — that he's fully human but he's also fully divine. That's really where our gospel picks up with today. Today, we begin with the Jews' response to the first half of the discourse when they say, “How can he say that he is the bread that has come down from heaven when we know that he's Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” In other words, they're saying we know this man as a human being who has lived among us. We know Joseph; we know his mother Mary. How can he now say that he's come down from heaven? In other words, the Jews understand that when Jesus says I am the bread that has come down from heaven he's making a divine claim. He's claiming that he has a heavenly origin, and the scandal or the stumbling block that they're struggling with is believing in his divinity, alright?

I have to stress this because sometimes we don't think about this clearly enough. I cannot say that I've come down from heaven. You cannot say that you have come down from heaven. No human being comes down from heaven. All of us are creatures; we are created by God, directly and immediately in the wombs of our mother when God infuses a soul into a

body and makes a human person, body and soul composite. From the moment of our conception we are treated as human beings; we are human, right, in our nature. The same thing is not true for Christ. We can say that Christ comes down from heaven because unlike every other human being who is a human person created by God in the womb of our mothers, Christ is a divine person who assumes a human nature in the miracle of the incarnation at the annunciation, right. So, Christ comes down from heaven because he is pre-existent; he's a pre-existent divine person. In other words, he has being — he is being itself — before he ever becomes man. So when Christ says, “I am the bread which has come down from heaven,” there is an implicit claim to divinity in that. And, the Jews recognize it and so they say: whoa whoa whoa — how can he say that he's come down from heaven when we know his mother and his father, right? You can imagine this would be particularly scandalous for any Jews in Galilee who may have known Jesus from when he was a boy. They would've seen the fullness of his humanity and it would have been hard for them to comprehend how he can now make a claim to divinity, right.

So when Jesus answers them — notice what he says in our reading, he says don't murmur among yourselves. Now pause there for a second. This should call to mind the Old Testament reading from the previous Sunday when we saw in the book of Exodus 16 that once the Israelites got out into the desert they murmured against God and against Moses. They complained against him. So, Jesus is very deliberately here alluding to the Israelites in the Old Testament who refuse to believe that God had come to save them, right. So, now too the Jews that he is speaking to are murmuring against his claim to have come down from heaven to be the true manna. So he kind of explains to them: “Listen, no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Very important — what does that mean? What Jesus is saying there is that for us to believe in him it is necessary for God to pour out his grace upon us. In other words, even our active faith in believing Jesus is divine is a gift

from God. So, if you believe that Jesus is God, if you believe that Jesus is divine, you need to take a little time tonight, say a prayer and thank God for the gift of faith because the very fact that you believe is the result of God's grace acting in your mind and in your heart.

So, first, Jesus is pointing out the primacy of grace - “no one can come to me unless the Father draws him.” Second, he's also pointing out to them that the Old Testament itself already anticipated the fact that he would be divine, that the Messiah will be more than mere man because in the book of Isaiah 55:2 it says, “They shall all be taught by God.” Now, what’s that referring to? Well, Isaiah was the great prophet of the age of the Messiah. Isaiah was the great prophet of the age of salvation. In Isaiah 55, he’s talking about that future age of salvation and he says they shall all be taught by God. So, what Jesus is saying here is why are you objecting to me making a divine claim when the Old Testament itself says that everyone will be taught by God himself. That's what I'm doing to you now; I’m teaching you; I am the God who has come down from heaven to teach you. I mean, that's what’s implicit in his words.

The third point that he makes here is that no one has ever seen God except the one who has come from God; he has seen the Father. So, notice what else he's claiming — not only has he come down from heaven but he has seen the face of the Father, which the Old Testament makes clear that no man can see and live, right. So these are extraordinary claims that Jesus is making about himself. And, all of them are under the umbrella of the image of the manna, that he is the Bread of Life who has come down from heaven. And, he basically brings this first part of his Bread of Life discourse to a close when he says, “Truly, truly I say to you he who believes has eternal life.” So, in other words, the point of this whole first section of the Bread of Life discourse is to bring them to faith in Jesus' divinity. Why? Well, because we have to believe in Christ in order to even begin to access the mystery of the Eucharist. And, I just want to pause here for a second

and just stress that I think this is really telling that Jesus reveals the mystery of his divinity before he reveals the mystery of the Eucharist. I remember when I was a young Catholic and I was first beginning to study the Scriptures, I assumed that all of John 6 was simply about the Eucharist. And, so I would try to use John 6 to help explain the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And, when I encounter non-Catholic Christians — you know, friends or family — they would interpret it differently. They would say, “Oh, well, the manna Jesus is using here is just a metaphor.” And, I’d say, “No, no. It’s not a metaphor; it’s real. He’s really talking about his body and blood.” And as we’re going to see next week that’s true when he gets to the second part of the discourse and he begins to explicitly talk about the Eucharist. But, in the first half of the discourse he hasn’t said anything about the Eucharist just yet. He hasn’t said anything about eating his flesh or drinking his blood. All he’s doing at this point is using the manna to reveal his heavenly origin, using the manna to reveal his divinity. The first point he wants to make is that they need to believe in him. They need to believe that he is God who has come down as man, that he is the bread who has come down from heaven. And, so the first half of the discourse — over and over — you’ll see the most prominent word is believe, believe, believe, believe, believe, and come down from heaven, from heaven, from heaven. The focus is on his divinity and on his heavenly nature.

With that said, though, the gospel for today actually moves into the second part of the Bread of Life discourse where Jesus shifts gears a bit and starting in verse 48 he reiterates his identity as the manna from heaven, as the true bread of life. But, now he begins to use different words. Instead of talking about believing, he starts to focus on eating; and instead of focusing on his divinity he begins to focus on the food and drink that he’s going to give in the Eucharist. So, let’s see what he says here: “I am the bread of life,” verse 48 — that’s the beginning of the second part of the discourse, “your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from

heaven that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. And, the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Alright, so pause there. Notice now that Jesus has reiterated his identity as the Bread of Life; he begins to focus, now, on the most prominent verb here being eat—*esthiō* in Greek. Because now he is leading them into the fact that because he's the bread from heaven, they're not just going to have to believe that he has a heavenly origin, they're also going to have to consume him. And, how does he lead them into this astounding mystery of eating his flesh and drinking blood? What preparation could they possibly have in the Old Testament for that kind of food? Well, Jesus explicitly goes back to the manna. He says, “Your father's ate the manna in the wilderness but they died. I am the bread which comes down from heaven that a man may eat of it and not die. And, the bread that I'm going to give,” in other words, the new manna, “is my flesh.” So, here Jesus is now introducing a new element which is going to be the revelation of the Eucharist as the new manna. Now, to look at that we're going to have to wait until next week because the Gospel is going to pick up where he leaves off here. But, for now I just want you to see that distinction; he's calling people to both believe in him but also to eat his flesh. And, both of those are tied to the image of the manna from heaven.

Alright, with that said, now let's go back to the Old Testament reading for today. We saw that on the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time the church gave us the miraculous multiplication of the loaves under the prophet Elisha. In this case we actually back up in time, so to speak, and go back to the ministry of the earlier prophet, the prophet Elijah with a very famous story of Elijah traveling to Mount Sinai in the desert and being fed with miraculous food. So, this is in 1 Kings 19:4-8. And, before I read it, the context here is that the prophet Elijah is being persecuted by the wicked Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was one of just a few ancient Israelite queens, and she was known for being the most perverse and the

most wicked of them all. And, as a wicked queen she is out to kill Elijah. So Elijah has to flee from her and he goes into hiding effectively, and this is what happens. 1 Kings 19:4:

Elijah himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Alright, so what's going on here? Why does the Church pick this? What's the significance of this passage? Well, if you go back to the Old Testament and you look at this in the context of the Old Testament, there's already a kind of typological significance within the Old Testament itself in which certain events that took place at the time of the Exodus are being recapitulated in the lives of the prophets. So, in this sense notice what's happening to Elijah. He goes into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights; he heads to mount Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai, the mountain of God; and for those 40 days and 40 nights he's fed by miraculous food from heaven — this bread that is given to him by this angel that appears to him. Now, does any of that sound familiar? Traveling through the desert for a period of 40 years connected with Mount Sinai and being fed during that period with miraculous bread from heaven? Yeah, it should make you think of the Exodus of the

Israelites from Egypt in the time of Moses. Except in this case instead of a corporate group of a nation traveling through the desert for 40 years, we have an individual prophet traveling through the desert for 40 days. But, in both cases they are sustained by miraculous bread from heaven. In one case it's the manna, but in this case it's the Bread of the Angels; it's this bread given to Elijah by the angel in order to strengthen him so that the journey would not be too great for him.

So what's the significance of that in the context of Jesus' discourse on the manna. Well, I think this is just one more case in which we see that although history does not repeat itself, it does rhyme (I think Mark Twain is the one who said that). So we have these kind of movements and cycles in Old Testament history where God will deliver his people — he will save his people in ways similar to what he has done before. So, in Exodus, at the time the Israelites, he gives miraculous bread from heaven. In Elijah's time, as he travels through the desert, he gives him miraculous food of the Angels. And, so too, both those things — the manna of the wilderness and the miraculous Bread of Angels in Elijah's day — is to be fulfilled — both of them are going to be fulfilled — through the ultimate gift of heavenly bread which is Christ himself coming down to save us, but also, of course, the gift of the Eucharist in the new covenant.

And so the Responsorial Psalm for today kind of bridges that gap between the Old and New Testaments by focusing on Psalm 34 and the refrain: taste and see the goodness of the Lord. Now, in this case it's really fascinating because what this Psalm is doing is it's focusing on the provision of food as part of God's deliverance, as part of God answering the prayers of his people — satisfying the needs of their hearts. Look at Psalm 34:6-8, some of the Psalm lines that we sing. It says this, “The poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. O taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy is the man

who takes refuge in him.” So, what does that mean. Well, on the level of Psalm, what the Psalmist is doing here is remembering how God in the Old Testament answers the prayers of his people. So, when the poor man cries out to God, God hears him, right. And, he saves him from his troubles. Think here of Elijah, right. Elijah was in a state of desperation; he was being persecuted; people were seeking him out to murder him, to kill him, and he cries out to God for assistance and God helps him. He sends an angel to guard him. He sends an angel to provide for him and to give him the bread and the water that would give him strength for the journey. And, in that context you could say that Elijah himself tasted and saw that the Lord was good. Well, whenever we sing the Psalms, though, we’re not just looking back, we’re also applying them to us today, right. So, what's happening today? Well, the Responsorial Psalm sung by the Church is also in a sense reflecting on the Eucharist itself — that in the celebration of the mass what happens is God answers our prayers, God delivers us from all of our worries and anxieties, fears and sufferings by giving us the greatest nourishment and the greatest gift he could possibly give us: namely, the gift of himself, the gift of his Son, the gift of his body, his blood, his soul and his divinity in the Eucharist — the true food from heaven that really will sustain us if we’re faithful on our journey through this desert, through this valley of tears, through this world, this present world which is filled with suffering and death, and for many Christians throughout the world with persecution. And, in which many Christians are in a desperate situation and they need some sign that God is with them, some sign of his provision and that is given to us above all in the gift of the Eucharist itself. So, Christ here taking the image of manna from the Old Testament in a sense also wraps up into that this image of miraculous bread given to Elijah in the desert and all of that is coming to pass in the gift of the Eucharist itself.

As I'm saying this too, it makes me think about the fact that in the Eucharistic Prayer — the first Eucharistic Prayer commonly known as the Roman Canon — you'll notice there's also an emphasis on, and a

promise given to, the role of the angels because one of the things the priest says — I'm not quoting exactly here; I'm just doing it from memory — let your angel bring this offering to your altar in heaven. The idea that the angels participate in the offering of the Eucharistic God is something that goes all the way back to St. Paul, who talks about the presence of the angels and the gathering at the Lord's supper. But, it's part of the Catholic tradition; it's part of that first Eucharistic Prayer. So notice what we see there in both the first reading and in the Psalm: we don't just have miraculous bread, we also have the presence of the angels involved — these heavenly messengers from God, these heavenly spirits that surround his people, guard them, provide for them and protect them. In fact — I closed my Bible, I shouldn't have done that — but Psalm 34 — you might have seen that verse I just read: "The angel the Lord encamps around those who fear him," that's probably the classic text that is the foundation for the Church's tradition of the Guardian Angels — that one of the roles the angels play is not just to intercede for us but also to pray for us and protect us, to guard us as well.

So, I'd like to close then with actually a couple of points from the living tradition, one with regard to the Eucharist and the other with regard to angels. So — we'll do the second one first — with regard to the angels, I'd just like to highlight, given the fact that we have two texts describing angel guardians — the first reading and the Psalm — that in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 336, the Church actually has an official teaching about Guardian Angels. And, not only does the catechism affirm that the angels exist, but it also says this about the role of Guardian Angels. Paragraph 336 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

From its beginning until death, human life is surrounded by their [the angels'] watchful care and intercession. "Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life." Already here on earth the

Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God.

So, you see there — that’s actually a quote from St. Basil the Great saying that beside each believer stands an angel as a protector and a shepherd. So, that’s the Church’s classic stance on Guardian Angels. Where do we get this idea? Well, it’s from the Scriptures — the idea that angels have as their function to protect and guard those who cry out to God, follow the Lord, who walk in his ways, and so that beside each of us there is an angel whose primary mission is to guard and protect us. We see that happening with Elijah, but we also see it in the Church’s teaching. And, then finally I would just highlight once again that all of this emphasis that I’m placing on the manna is nothing new. In fact, St. Augustine many centuries ago saw this very clearly when he was commenting on the Gospel of John as we’re doing today. He said this about John chapter 6 and the manna - this quote:

The manna also came down from heaven; but *the manna was a shadow, this is the truth*. ‘If anyone shall have eaten of this Bread, he will live forever, and the Bread which I shall give is my Flesh for the life of the world’.²

And, Augustine highlights that verse, which was part of our Gospel today, because it’s crucial to the teaching on the real presence of Jesus. I know for my part whenever I would try to emphasize the teaching of the real presence I would often look at the institution narrative where Jesus says, “This is my body” and “This is my blood,” but I think it’s important to remember, as Augustine points out, that’s not the only place where Jesus says that it is his body or it is his blood. But, in the Bread of Life discourse he’s very clear, he says the bread which I shall give for

² Augustine of Hippo, Tractate on John, 26:13; trans. NPNF

the life of the world is my flesh. And, when we come back next Sunday we're going to see how the Jews react to that claim and how they object to him saying that he will in fact give them his flesh to eat.