

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B



FIRST READING
1 Kings 19:4–8

PSALM
Psalm 34:2–9

SECOND READING
Ephesians 4:30–5:2

GOSPEL
John 6:41–51

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PRAYER

Psalm 34:2–9

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually
be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
I sought the LORD,
and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor soul cried,
and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
The angel of the LORD
encamps around those who fear him,
and delivers them.
O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those
who take refuge in him.

READING THE WORD

First Reading 1 Kings 19:4–8

Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is

enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Second Reading Ephesians 4:30–5:2

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Gospel John 6:41–51

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

HEARING THE WORD

“Nourishment for Life”

The liturgy of last Sunday treated the theme of choosing appropriate nourishment which will sustain life. Today's liturgy continues this theme, with further identification of the sustenance that leads the Christian to a fuller and lasting life.

The prophet Elijah exhausted his energy and motivation. He had stood against the Israelite king and tried to bring his people to repentance. He failed. In the end, the death sentence was passed on him, and he became a refugee to save his life (1 Kgs 19:1-3). No longer confident, disillusioned and desperate, he fled, seeking death from hunger and thirst in the desert. Perhaps he also lost faith that God still worked thorough him, or that his mission mattered. While Elijah gave up on God, on himself and on his mission, God did not. First, an angel was sent to the despondent prophet, bringing him bread and water. He was commanded to eat and drink, his restoration began with the strengthening of the body. But physical strength alone was insufficient, and Elijah returned to his depressed slumber. In his second appearance, the angel again brought food, but also said that the prophet is to undertake a journey. This statement provided Elijah with hope for a new beginning and a new purpose. Revitalized in the body, and energized by

hope, Elijah walked without food for forty days towards mount Horeb. “Horeb” is the name by which mount Sinai was known in the Northern Kingdom, from where Elijah came. The journey to Horeb lasted forty days, which is exactly the length of time Moses spent on the same mountain receiving God's law, also without food or drink (Exod 34:28). At the mountain Elijah encountered God, and received a new mission, one which would eventually lead to the religious restoration of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kgs 19:11-18). The story highlights how God sustained and renewed the prophet. This renewal began with the provision of ordinary food for the body, continued with awakening of a new hope, and concluded with the divine encounter which restored the prophet's faith, and gave him a new purpose. God restored the prophet to life through nourishing his body, and giving him hope and faith.

The reading from Ephesians continues to focus on the theme of faithfulness to the uniqueness of Christian identity. As we read last week, this identity is a matter of a clear and decisive choice. Once made, that choice must be upheld in the face of adversity and challenges coming in various forms. Life in the community poses just such a challenge. Paul names six harmful behaviours which damage relationships between the community members. Bitterness, wrath, anger, quarrels, slander and malice, all

severely weaken the community, and make life difficult for its members. Moreover, they “grieve” the Holy Spirit. The possession, or the “seal”, of the Spirit was, and is, the mark of a true Christian. The wrongs that undermine the harmony in the community weaken its Christian identity, and that of its members. Such a situation grieves the Holy Spirit, because it undermines the work of the Spirit among the believers.

Set side by side with that which weakens the community, Paul places those virtues that build it up. The author lists kindness, tenderness and forgiveness as the practices that cement unity among the members. However, the author's key exhortation is to imitate God through the practice of love. Love crowns and encapsulates all other virtues and makes those who practice it God's children. Sacrificing himself out of love, Christ provided the best example of love. Like him, the faithful ought to live a life of self-sacrifice, through which they build up themselves and their communities. Sustaining Christian life is not a matter of mechanical observance of rules, but a matter of love. That self-sacrificial love which was in Christ, and gave life to the world, sustains and nourishes the Christian communities as well.

Last Sunday's Gospel ended with a question whether the crowds will be able to look beyond their preoccupation with ordinary bread, and accept Jesus' unique

nourishment. Today's Gospel will reveal what nourishment Jesus had in mind.

In response to Jesus' claim to be "the bread from heaven" the listeners "murmur". Like the disgruntled Israelites in the desert, they are unhappy. Apparently, the people knew his family, and his claim to come from heaven appeared absurd. They were incapable of seeing him as anybody other than an ordinary human being. Jesus responded citing the prophetic word, implying that God's people will be taught by God. Consequently, his listeners were either not God's people, or they resisted God's instruction. All those who hear God's voice recognize Jesus as coming from the Father. Those who do not, obviously did not allow themselves to be "drawn by the Father" to Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus truthfully represents the Father because he saw him (cf. John 1:18). Therefore, to believe in Jesus as the one sent by the Father, means seeing in him the promised saviour, and having eternal life in him. Jesus' remarkable assertions about coming from God, and being the source of eternal life, lays the foundation for the second part of the passage.

The second part of the passage begins with Jesus' statement, "I am the bread of life". He then contrasts himself with another type of "bread from heaven", manna. Manna fed the Israelites on their way through the desert. Jesus provides a different kind of nourishment. The food he offers gives eternal life. Manna

came from trees and sustained earthly life. Jesus came from God and brings heavenly life. To possess this life, one needs to "eat" this bread. But what exactly is this new bread? Jesus describes it as his flesh given for the life of the world. Undoubtedly, he refers to his death on the cross, which opened the way to eternal life. One must immediately remember John 3:14, where Jesus summarized his entire mission, stating that he was sent by God to die in order to bring life to the people. Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross becomes a nourishment which, when received, makes a person alive in a new and enduring way. Jesus himself is the nourishment for everlasting life.

Life requires nourishment. The body requires physical food, but human life is much more than about sustaining the body. To continue with his prophetic mission, to continue to be a prophet, Elijah needed the nourishment of hope and faith. He received these in an encounter with God, which reignited his zeal and mission. In Ephesus, the Christian community, wrestling with internal frictions, was reminded that to live out their calling truthfully, they need Christ-like love as sustaining force. Created in the likeness of God, the human race enjoyed immortality. It was an extraordinary gift which was subsequently lost. Jesus restores that gift of eternal life, offering his body as a sacrifice on the cross. Doing so, he becomes the bread of life for those who seek eternal life - the nourishment that en-

dures and makes those who receive it live for eternity. He invites all to reach for this gift and receive it from him. This invitation could be paraphrased in the words of the psalmist, "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Giving up appears a tempting solution when we are confronted with challenges, or when we fail. Failures can cripple our dreams and make us feel like worthless losers. Even something as simple as failing an exam at school can make some people despair, and abandon their dreams, hopes and aspirations, which otherwise nourished and provided zeal and energy for their lives. One of the topics of this Sunday is about how to deal with failure.

There are many prominent people today who failed many times and in different ways. Yet, they have gone on to become extraordinarily successful people. Elijah can also serve as a good example of such a person. He did give up on himself and we are told that God himself had to intervene to raise him from the depths of despair. The example of Elijah points us to a way beyond failure. First, the Elijah story teaches us that whatever task, assignment or project we intend to do, we cannot be successful if we do not first entrust it to God. We have to rely on the Lord for inspiration and to remain con-

stantly under his guidance. God respects our freedom and does not force himself into our life, if we do not invite him. But, without God, if failure occurs, we are left on our own. When we embark on our life projects with God, like Elijah did, we may be sure that even when failure and despair overwhelm us, God will intervene. Prayer is essential in nourishing our hope and giving us strength. It ensures that we will not run out of hope and faith. These two are the nourishment that can raise us up from any failure, and energize us for a new beginning.

Keen awareness of who we are also nourishes us as Christians. It is easy to lose the sense of how special we are by the virtue of being disciples and followers of Jesus. Many Christians today prefer to hide who they are, or, at least, not to manifest it publicly. Yet, our Christian identity must shine through who we are, and how we behave. As in the case of the Ephesian community, knowing what we received, and what is our destiny, can and will empower us, and make us different to the world, by the power and working of the Spirit in us. But we must not shy away from who we are, and we must be able to acknowledge it publicly. This sense of our identity and dignity may and will give us nourishment and strength to grow and develop as Jesus' disciples.

Jesus reminds us today that he himself nourishes our daily life as "the bread from heaven". This statement has

many implications. On the very basic level, it means that we must be nourished by him in order to live a life that will lead to heaven. Therefore, before we undertake any task in life, or make decisions, even small ones, we must make them in reference to Jesus, his example and his teaching. When we do this, he will indeed play a nourishing and sustaining role in our lives. When so nourished, we will never lack the true life, a life that flourishes on earth, and will bear fruit in the heavenly life.

PROVERB

*"No one
should go far
from where
his corn
is roasting."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What nourishes my faith and love?
To whom do I turn for guidance when I am confused and lost?

Response to God:

My prayer this week will in-

clude acts of thanksgiving for the great dignity God bestowed on me in making me a believer and revealing his Son and his teaching to me.

Response to your World:

This week I will be faithful to my prayer life and entrust all my plans and actions to God, so that I may be guided through proper discernment to what is the will of God for me.

Together we will reflect on what keeps us together as a group/community. Where do we need to improve so that our being together might nourish our faith and love even more?

PRAYER

*Dear God,
for the many times
I have strayed
from following you
and doing your will,
please pardon me,
and continue to lead me in life.
Give me strength
and nourishment
in the moments
that I am weak and down,
for you are the beginning
and end of everything.
Amen.*