

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 9, 2009 B

A DOWN-IN-THE-DUMPS PROPHET IS RENEWED

Reflecting on today's wonderful first reading, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

In the first reading of today's Mass we meet the man who is generally regarded to be the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets—Elijah. But we meet him today in the depths of despair. A wicked queen (Jezebel) is hunting him down to kill him. So what does he do? He flees into the desert. There a terrible anguish comes over him. He feels he has taken all he can take. He just wants to die, so he asks God to take his life away. But instead of doing that, God sends an angel to him with food and water. Strengthened by these, the prophet arises and makes his way to the mountain of God (Horeb). There he encounters God and is enabled to resume his mission.

Who was this kind angel who saved his life? It may have been a human "angel." More than likely, the prophet's own servant whom he had left a short distance away, a kind of "human" angel that may help us to get up after we have been knocked down.

In some ways it is a consolation for us to think that a great man of God like Elijah could experience such despair. That he could be down, broken, and crushed. Many people go through a period like that. It is only the care of some human angel that helps them go through it. This is the normal way in which God's care is mediated to us. We too may get the glorious privilege of being that kind of ministering angel to someone in despair. By our love, we can help them pull through it, through small acts, insignificant in themselves.

Ultimately, the "angel" God sent to us is none other than his Son, Jesus. It is he who stays by our side when we are down and crushed and unable to carry on. He gives us, not ordinary bread, but the "bread of life." In the strength of this bread we will walk all the way to the Mountain of God, namely, eternal life.

How much do we trust him? How much do we hunger for the bread only he can give?

If we are down at this time, we should be alert to the "human" angels that God may be placing in our lives, helping to get us start up our lives again.

Fr. McCarthy adds the following reflection:

*Like a fruit tree we all know our seasons.
In spring the tree is full of buds and blossoms.*

So at times our lives are full of hope and promise.

In summer the tree is full of leaves.

Our lives at times are like that.

They are full of joy and contentment.

*In autumn the tree becomes a feast of color
and is full of ripe fruit.*

*At times our lives are like that—
full of meaning and achievement.*

But in winter the tree is stripped bare.

So winter can hit our lives.

*We are in the grip of a pain and depression
that robs us of everything, even of the will to live.*

"Put aside grudges, slander and name-calling... Forgive readily."

Today's second reading is equally remarkable. Paul encourages us not to "grieve the spirit" by being bitter, holding onto grudges, engaging in slander and name-calling. Paul knows first-hand what it is like to grieve the Spirit when he was persecuting the first Christians. Redemptorist priest, Dennis McBride, shares the following great story on how *not* to forgive by offering too little too late.

Frederick William I, King of Prussia, ruled severely as monarch from 1713 until 1740. He created a powerfully centralized government, in every department of which he scrutinized operations and exercised the final power of decision. He became deeply disappointed in his son, the future Frederick the Great, who was more interested in culture and music than military superiority. The father's disaffection turned to hatred, and his treatment became so harsh that the young prince decided to run away. But he and his accomplice were caught and faced a court-martial. The prince was sentenced to solitary confinement; his accomplice to life imprisonment. King Frederick decided that the sentence of life imprisonment was too lenient; he had the accomplice beheaded in the presence of his son. This drastic measure had the desired effect: the prince asked the king's pardon and applied himself to military studies.

When the king was on his deathbed, the attending priest warned him that if he wished to go to heaven he would have to forgive all his enemies. The king's thoughts turned to his favorite enemy, George II of England. "In that case," he told his wife reluctantly, "write to your brother and tell him that I forgive him. But be sure not to do it until I am dead."

Being well dead is a little late for forgiveness. A message of forgiveness telegraphed from the cemetery is a classic case of too little too late. But the image does summarize what we find ourselves doing too often: hoarding hurt, watching over our aging grudges as if they were valuable antiques. So it is that forgiveness gets delayed. Sometimes we delay so long that we are left standing at a graveside quietly whispering forgiveness to a lowered coffin, wishing we had found enough courage to speak our peace long before the ritual farewell.

The Gospel: the Bread of Life discourse continues

Last Sunday's Gospel ended with Jesus saying to the crowds: *"I myself am the Bread of Life."* Today, we listened to the third session on Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life. It opens with the crowd's response to those words which is one of "murmuring." They keep saying: *"Who is this, isn't he Joseph's son, how can he say he has come down from heaven?"*

Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the people are operating on a natural level. They are "seeing" Jesus only with natural eyes. As of yet, they do not see with the eyes of faith.

Commenting on this Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Ironies abound in John's gospel and chapter six is no exception. As we saw in last week's gospel, there was irony in the fact that the people were seeking Jesus but did not want to follow him. They called him Rabbi, but they were not willing to be taught by him. They clamored after bread, but they did not want to be filled or fed by him.

Perhaps the saddest irony of all is the fact of the full-bellied crowds, staring at their toothpicks, idly asking Jesus for some sign that would validate his claims (to be that Bread of Life) and then dismissing both Jesus and his teaching because they thought they knew him. Even the sign of the loaves and their fully-satisfied physical hunger weren't sufficient to quell their murmuring. We know who he is, they reasoned, so how can he claim to have come down from heaven?!

Just as the gift of the loaves (John 6:1-15) was meant to reprise God's gift of manna in the desert, and just as Jesus' walking on the water (John 6:16-21) was reminiscent of the deliverance at the Sea of Reeds, so also does this excerpt from the lengthy bread of life discourse harken back to Israel's journey through the wilderness. Despite the gifts of manna, quail and water from the rock, the people murmured against God and Moses. Despite this gift of the bread, of his teaching and of his very self as food, the crowds murmured against Jesus. As the discourse progresses and as it becomes clearer and clearer what Jesus is offering, the murmuring will increase proportionately.

Perhaps it was precisely because they did understand the implications and significance of Jesus' gift that his contemporaries were moved to murmur against him. According to the Strack and Billerbeck Commentary, the rabbis compared the Torah with bread; they taught that, like bread, the Torah nourishes, gives life and reveals God. When Jesus offered himself, i.e., his teaching as life-giving bread, he was putting himself and the bread of his words on a par with—or even above—the Torah. Moreover, Jesus affirmed that the bread of his teaching required a deep spiritual hunger, a hunger that only God could prompt in the believer: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Being drawn to Jesus by God means that believers have allowed the gifts of faith within them to grow and to respond to the One who gave it.

Reflecting on the Eucharist and its multi-layered meaning, Michael F. Daley writes:

John's Gospel today tells us that communion with Jesus Christ reaches its deepest level and greatest expression in the Eucharist. It is in and through the Eucharist that Christians share in the risen life of Christ.

The Eucharist is many things. It is a sacrament: it makes real, in the concrete forms of bread and wine, the risen Christ. It is meal: in this encounter with Jesus we are fed and nourished. It is sacrifice: in the Eucharist we see Jesus' gift of self for us on the cross. It is expectation: the Eucharist points to our goal of eternal union with Christ.

Ultimately, the Eucharist, and Jesus' presence in it, is a mystery, a mystery that involves faith and trust. The Eucharist goes beyond proof; it always will elude our total understanding. Yet, for all that it remains dear to our hearts and is expressed in the devotion of Christians.

Jesus reminds us that the Eucharist is primarily about relationship. If we allow ourselves to be nourished and sustained by the Eucharist, this relationship of commitment to Jesus opens us up to eternal life.

An adage attributed to St. Augustine says: "You are what you eat; be the Body of Christ." In and through the Eucharist, we become one with Christ and he one with us. The Eucharist calls us to be Christ-like. Our relationship with Jesus through the Eucharist will bear fruit in this world through our actions. Through the Eucharist, we find Jesus in our past, present and future.

Have a blessed week,

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