

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading -1 Kings19:4-8

Two weeks ago (17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B) we explored a little of the background of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings and the fact that they cover the period of time in Hebrew history from the death of the first king (Saul) to the Babylonian captivity and destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. Jewish tradition has it that these books were compiled from various sources by the prophet Jeremiah during the Babylonian captivity.

A great crisis occasioned the writing of Kings. In 587-586 B.C. the Babylonian armies of Nebuchadnezzar reached the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the city, burned the temple to the ground, and deported to Babylon the cream of Judean citizenry. Jeremiah, because of his predictions of the fall of Jerusalem, was well treated by the occupiers as a Babylonian sympathizer and offered his choice of residence in Babylon or Judah. Jeremiah chose Judah and urged those who were left in the country to live in peace. Later, Jeremiah and Baruch (his secretary) were forced by the people to accompany them as they fled to Egypt where legend has it Jeremiah was either stoned or starved to death by his fellow exiles.

The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple were seen by the people as an abandonment by God. The protection of Israel which had been promised by God in the Sinai covenant was not realized. The temple of which He had said "My name shall be there" (1 Kings 8:29; 2 Kings 23:27) lay in ruins. The 400 year old rule of the Davidic dynasty, to which God had promised perpetuity, had come to a jarring halt, and for the believing Israelite this fact had brought faith to a horrible impasse: How could God be said to be faithful to His covenant promises? How could Israel still believe the divine promise that the Davidic dynasty would be eternal?

The time of our reading today is considerably before this tumultuous time however, somewhere around 870 B.C., give or take 10 years. Today we hear of Elijah's flight to Horeb (the name means "dry"). Horeb is the "mountain of God", also known as Sinai; the scene of the burning bush (Exodus 3:1); the golden calf (Exodus 32), and the promulgation of the covenant (Deuteronomy 4:10; Exodus 19-24).

The events leading immediately up to today's reading are: Ahab is king of Israel and married to Jezebel. Jezebel has fostered the worship of the Canaanite baal in Israel and has supported 450 prophets of the baal (1 Kings 18:19). In her hostility to Yahweh worship Jezebel attempted to exterminate all the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18:4,13). When Elijah stirred up a popular movement which resulted in the killing of the baal prophets, Jezebel decreed death for him also (1 Kings 19:1-2). Elijah flees to Horeb to lay a complaint before Yahweh.

⁴ [Elijah] went a day's journey into the desert, until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it. He prayed for death: "This is enough, O LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

Since Jezebel has almost overnight been able to overcome his victories and cancel his long and arduous campaign to turn Israel back to Yahweh, Elijah is in despair and begs God to take him. God, however, will both comfort and strengthen His prophet.

⁵ He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.

The angel is a messenger of God.

⁶ He looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water.

In 1 Kings 17:6 Elijah also received miraculous rations when ravens fed him.

After he ate and drank, he lay down again, ⁷ but the angel of the LORD came back a second time, touched him, and ordered, "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!"

⁸ He got up, ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb.

The distance is approximately 300 miles which could be traveled in much less than forty days. These numbers may be quoted to make a parallel to Moses' time on the mountain (Exodus 24:18). Forty, in Hebrew numerology, is the number associated with trial, testing, a time of change, a generation.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 4:30-5:5

Last week (18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B) we heard from the portion of Ephesians where Paul addressed interior renewal and the week before that we heard his call to unity. This week St. Paul addresses Christian virtues. The first consequence of our interior renewal (new life) is the practice of virtue: virtues make it possible, and pleasant, for Christians to live together as members of the one body of Christ; his Church. The practice of virtue enables them to live together in love, imitating Christ who gave Himself up for love of us.

^{4:30} And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,

Since we are one body, any offense against a fellow member is an offense against the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22; 4:3-4).

with which you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Baptism makes an indelible mark upon the soul. Recall last week's (18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B) discussion of seal in relation to the gospel – whoever bears the seal is under the protection of the owner of the seal.

“That we have been ‘sealed’ with the Holy Spirit means that both our spirit and our soul are

impressed with God's own seal, signifying that we belong to Him. By this we receive in ourselves that image and likeness in which we were created at the outset . . . You are sealed so that you may be preserved to the end. You may show that seal on the day of redemption, pure and unblemished and not damaged in any part. You are thereby ready to be counted with those who are redeemed" [Saint Jerome (A.D. 436), *Commentaries On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 2,4,30].

³¹ All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice.

A list of vices (Colossians 3:8).

"All this bitterness is not merely to be cleansed but to be *put away* altogether. Why should anyone try to contain it or hold it in? Why keep the beast of anger around so as to have to watch it constantly? It is possible to banish it, to expel it and drive it off to some mountain place" [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 15,4,31].

³² (And) be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

A list of virtues (Colossians 3:12). Forgiveness, for example, leads a person to treat his neighbor as Jesus taught (Matthew 5:23-24, Luke 23:34).

^{5:1} So be imitators of God, as beloved children,

(1 Thessalonians 1:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1) The perfect model of a child of God is found in Jesus, our brother (Romans 8:15-17). A good child tries to please his parents and follow their example. Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12).

² and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma.

Jesus' sacrifice initiated us into the New Covenant, made us members of His family. We have a covenant sacrifice which is consumed in a family meal. A covenant which can be renewed (in the old covenant, the annual Passover meal – in the new covenant, the Eucharist).

"You spare your friends. He spared His enemies. . . . He suffered on His enemies' behalf. This is the fragrant offering, the acceptable sacrifice. If you suffer for your enemies as a fragrant offering, you too become an acceptable sacrifice, even if you die. This is what it means to imitate God [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 17,4,32-5,2].

Gospel - John 6:41-51

We now continue with Jesus' bread of life discourse at Capernaum. Last week (18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B) Jesus had just declared that He is the bread of life; he who comes to Him shall not hunger, he who believes in Him shall not thirst.

⁴¹ The Jews

In the Gospel of John, this term is often used to denote representatives of Judaism, it's leadership.

murmured about him

This is the same reaction the Jews had toward Moses before they received manna in the desert; when their stomachs grumbled, so did they (Ex 16:2). God then, as now, recognized their grumbling as being against Him because of their lack of belief and trust (Ex 16:8). Even after they had received the manna in the desert, some continued to complain (Numbers 11:4-6). God silenced these complainers by slaying them (Psalm 78:17-33). If these Jews surrounding Jesus don't stop murmuring and start believing, they will suffer spiritual death.

because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," ⁴² and they said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

How can He say that He has come down from heaven? How can He possibly claim to have come from God? After all, they think that they know His genealogy and it's of human, not divine, origin – He's a human being just like them. They are judging Him by preconceived prejudices rather than from the heart. They do not believe as Jesus, in His opening address to them, told them they must (verse 29) "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one He sent."

⁴³ Jesus answered and said to them, "Stop murmuring among yourselves.

Jesus doesn't even bother to address their protests. Instead, He reiterates what He has just said to them. Jesus is saying "By murmuring, you are behaving just like your ancestors in the desert when God provided them with the manna. You have seen enough signs to know that I exercise powers which only God has, yet you are not satisfied."

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him,

God's grace is necessary in order to have faith and understand (Isaiah 54:13). Jeremiah 31:33-34 has the same theme which accompanies the promise of the new covenant. Jesus is saying "If you believe that I have been sent by God, no further signs are necessary because you possess God's grace. If you don't believe I have been sent by God, no matter what signs I perform you won't do as I tell you because you lack the grace."

and I will raise him on the last day.

Again, the promise of resurrection. This does not mean that all that is necessary is to "Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior" and you will be saved. Salvation results not only from belief, but believing so deeply that you act on that belief and "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2:5).

⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets: 'They shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.

Isaiah 54:13 is what He quotes. Isaiah 54 promises the future covenant which God will establish with His people when the messiah comes (see also Isaiah 53:10-12; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father

Although the Old Testament sometimes represents God with a form, looked upon by creatures, the Jewish belief was firm: God was invisible and could not be seen by man.

except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

Jesus has seen the Father; He has come down from heaven (verse 38). Man can know God the Father only through the Son because He has seen Him and has come to reveal Him to us.

⁴⁷ Amen, amen, I say to you,

(Truly, truly; I solemnly assure you) A doubled *amen*; an oath which is sworn in a life and death situation.

whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life.

Jesus repeats this statement for the second time (verse 35) after repeating the oath; because the audience doubts Him. Having repeatedly identified Himself as one sent by God, Jesus now begins the second part of His discourse where He unveils the mystery of the Eucharist.

⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;

The manna sustained physical life but did not make them immortal, physically or spiritually. Their ancestors ate the manna but they also made the golden calf.

⁵⁰ this is the bread that comes down from heaven

It is a gift of God.

so that one may eat it

In the first Passover meal (Exodus 12:6-10) not only did you have to make the sacrifice and sprinkle its blood, you also had to eat it.

and not die.

If you do not eat the gift of God, you will die; if you do eat it, you will have an everlasting spiritual life.

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever;

This is the third time (verses 35 & 48) that He identifies Himself as the Bread of Life. In Hebrew

numerology the number three represents completeness. Jesus does not attempt to soften or alter His teaching. It is the literal meaning, not a figurative or metaphorical one, that He is trying to drive home.

and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Eucharistic theme has been reached; the mystery has been revealed (see also Hebrews 10:5-10). Notice that this is in the future tense, something to be accomplished at a later time.