

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(1Kings 19:4-8 / John 6:41-51)

08.08.2021

Bread

During the month of August, in our Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist, we listen to chapter 6 of St John's Gospel. This portion of the Gospel is called the Bread of Life Discourse. Here the bread is a rich symbol of everything that is necessary for life. From this point of view, the story of Elijah is a very concrete and vivid illustration of our vital need for bread and water if we want to get up and walk the path of life. For the author of the book of Ecclesiasticus, the first two necessities of life are water and bread (29:21) and God knows that. This is why, in the Our Father, Jesus makes us pray: "Give us each day our daily bread." (Lk 11:3)

We are not angels, our bodies are the place wherein salvation and eternal life begin for us. So we must respect our bodies and feed them appropriately.

Unfortunately we are living in a world where too many men, women and children do not have access to the proper amount of bread and water. A month ago, the World Food Programme declared that some 41 million people in 43 countries are at imminent risk of famine, with nearly 600,000 others in four countries already experiencing famine-like conditions.

Here I would like to say that the first Christian response to this situation is not to pray that God may use his magic wand and make bread and water appear miraculously in Ethiopia, South Sudan, or North Korea. We should pray that we may be open to God's will for his people and that the hearts and minds of all political leaders may be obedient to the Spirit of justice and peace, so that all may make the right political, economic and humanitarian decisions to help those who are longing for bread and water.

For his part, the author of the book of Proverbs mentions different kinds of bread: "the bread of wickedness" (4:17) and the "bread of idleness." (21:27)

As Christians we must be careful not to believe that it is enough for us to receive the bread of life in the consecrated host on Sundays and to live the rest of the week on the bread of greediness and selfishness. Our growth in holiness depends on our relationship of love with our brothers and sisters – love understood not just as a feeling, an attitude of sympathy and affection towards others but also as the motivation for concrete actions such as the sharing of bread and water and the transformation of social structures which prevent many from having access to the basic necessities of life.

For Jesus, life is communion, communion with God, with others and with oneself. Divisions exhaust our energy; words and deeds of exclusion and rejection, attitudes of self-reliance and self-sufficiency contradict the Gospel and prevent us from growing in holiness. The life of grace cannot be lived in isolation. Our holiness is woven into the fabric of our communion as brothers and sisters. We are never alone on the way of salvation.

Here the image of the bread is particularly relevant because it speaks of communion and so it speaks of life. In the 3rd century, St Cyprian wrote that the bread represented the Christian people "as having been made one, for just as numerous grains are gathered, ground and mixed all together to make into one loaf of bread, so in Christ, who is the bread of heaven, we know that there is but one body and that every one of us has been fused together and made one with it." (*Letter* 63:13.3, p. 105)

We know that there are many men, women and children who starve for communion and are thirsty for companionship. We know that, at the moment, the bread of division and polarisation is present in society and in our Churches. As Christians it seems to me that the prophetic ministry we have to exercise is to find ways of moving beyond division, to share with all the bread of dialogue and communion. We have to summon each other out of the exile of individualism which is so prevalent and which isolates us, debilitating our countries and communities.

Communion is the first word, the Irish Catholic bishops have chosen as the main theme for the coming 2 years of the national Synod. This is not pure coincidence... we all need to be rejuvenated in our commitment to work and pray for greater communion in society and in our communities.

We are a Eucharistic people because we receive the bread of eternal life and also because we are called to become bread for others, bread of life and communion. The challenge for each one of us and for our Churches is to offer to the world life-giving bread not bread which has become stale or blue. Our brothers and sisters in humanity are hungry for bread which will meet their physical needs and bread which will satisfy their hunger for meaning and purpose, peace and justice.

As Christians let us not forget that we are alive not only for ourselves but for Christ (cf. 2 Co 5:15), Christ who is present in all our brothers and sisters. Here and now, may we become the “pure bread of Christ” (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 4) in our families and communities so that, made one in Christ, we may “eat and drink at the Lord’s table in his kingdom.” (Lk 22:30)