

The food of the “word of God” - 19th Sunday

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John: (Jn. 6: 41-51)

The Jews were complaining to each other about Jesus because he had said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” “Surely this is Jesus son of Joseph,” they said. “We know his father and mother. How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”

Jesus said in reply: “Stop complaining to each other. No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise him up at the last day.

It is written in the prophets: They will all be taught by God, and to hear the teaching of the Father, and learn from it, is to come to me. Not that anybody has seen the Father, except the one who comes from God: he has seen the Father. I tell you most solemnly, everybody who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the desert and they are dead; but this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

- Last Sunday, we listened to the first part of the lesson which Jesus taught in the synagogue of Capernaum on the day following the multiplication of the loaves and fish. This first part of Jesus’ lesson could be summed up as follows: *“I am the nourishment of those who believe in me; I become so through their faith in me”*

- In this Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus goes on to explain the second part which again, could be summed up thus: *“You must feed on God’s Word; I become your nourishment when you do so, for I am that Word.”*

- *But how is this possible?*

Pay careful attention to what I am about to say; may the Spirit within you help you to understand it.

- By *“Word of God”* we mean any message God communicates to us, but in particular, those messages communicated in the past and which are found *in* Holy Scripture. God wanted them to be written down so that the people of all times may find in them a guide to salvation.

- Jesus came into the world to make his Father’s plans of love known to us in a much clearer way than they had been made known until then. Jesus IS therefore *“God’s messenger”*, the best that ever existed. He came to teach us God’s Word and did it so well that he has been called ever since *“The Master.”*

But there is something particular about this messenger: at the beginning of his Gospel John calls Jesus, *“THE WORD”*, God’s own Word. This means that Jesus is both, *God’s messenger and God’s message*, both in his own person.

Jesus, not only came to communicate God’s Word to us that we may have life, eternal life, but he meant God’s Word to become for us what he himself is, *a source of life.*

In other words, whenever we are nourished with God's Word, it is Jesus himself who becomes our nourishment.

1. The story of Elijah's weakness and strength:

- As a preparation for the lesson taught by Jesus *in* the Gospel, the Church, in this Sunday's first reading, brings to our attention a particular episode in the life of the prophet Elijah: his Journey to Mount *Sinai* in search of strength from Yahweh.

Let us now briefly narrate the circumstances which led the prophet to the situation described in today's reading.

- At the *time* Elijah lived, King Ahab reigned over the kingdom of Israel, one of the two in which Solomon's kingdom had been divided at his death. He was a *wicked* king, but twice as wicked was his wife Jezebel, the daughter of a pagan king in the region. Under her influence, most of the people of Israel had abandoned Yahweh to worship Baal a famous idol in the region.

Elijah was one of the few prophets of Yahweh still left, while those at the service of Baal ran into hundreds, all maintained by the queen.

- As a way to *bring* the people back to himself, God caused a terrible drought to come upon the region; not a drop of *rain* fell for three and a half years, causing *widespread* famine.

The king was worried and had no alternative but to meet the prophet. Elijah told the king to gather the people on Mount Carmel along with Baal's prophets.

Once there, the prophet challenged the king in the presence of all the people: "Let two bulls be brought", he told the king, "and two altars erected, one for Baal and the other for Yahweh. Let the bulls be slaughtered and placed on their respective altars to be burnt. No fire should be applied; the victim which will be consumed by fire coming down from heaven will show who the true God is, whether Baal or Yahweh.

The crowd welcomed the challenge and the king could not refuse it. From morning till afternoon the prophets of Baal went round their altar invoking their god, shouting and beating their breasts, but in vain.

When Elijah's turn came, he made a short prayer to Yahweh and fire came down in a moment, and consumed the victim placed on Yahweh's altar.

The crowd burst out in acclamations to Yahweh. Elijah did not lose time: he gave orders for the four hundred prophets of Baal, the rogues that misled Israel, to be slaughtered, and the people gladly complied; not one escaped, and the whole assembly acclaimed Yahweh as its God. That very afternoon rain fell in abundance; the drought had ended.

- On hearing the news, Jezebel went into a rage, and swore to kill Elijah within twenty four hours. The prophet had to run for his life, first to the kingdom of Judah nearby, then further South into the desert.

There we find him in the first reading, utterly discouraged in spite of his triumph on Mount Carmel, and begging God to end his life. He laid down under a bush, and went to sleep, hoping not to wake up again.

- An angel woke him up. “*Get up and eat*”, he told him. There was bread and water by his side. Elijah ate and drank and went to sleep again.

- The angel woke him up a second time; by his side there was a fresh ration of bread and water ready. On the strength of that food, Elijah walked through the desert for forty days till he reached Mount Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai, some 500 kms away from the place where the angel had appeared to him.

- On Mount Sinai, Yahweh spoke to Elijah. Strengthened by his word, the prophet went back to Israel and carried on with his task of trying to keep the people faithful to Yahweh.

- People have seen in the bread and water brought to Elijah by the angel, a symbol of the Holy Eucharist which strengthens us on our journey through the desert of this world, till we shall reach Mount Sinai, the mount where God lives, that is, heaven.

The comparison is valid, provided we keep in mind that what truly gave a new beginning to Elijah was his conversation with Yahweh on Mount Sinai. We shall speak about the Eucharist next Sunday; let us now come back to the central point in today’s message: *the Word of God is for us, Christians, a food we cannot do without.*

2. God has spoken to man

- It is an act of kindness for an elderly person to speak to a child, or for a highly placed Government officer to speak to a common man, or for the king to speak to a beggar. A far greater act of kindness is that God should stoop down to speak to man.

- God spoke to Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses and to the prophets. What did he tell them?

- He told them about his love for human beings and of his plans to save everyone.
- He told them about a Saviour to come and how the people should prepare to receive him.

But he conveyed his message step by step, in a language the people of the time could understand, as a good teacher leads his pupils a step at a time, careful not to go beyond what they can grasp at the moment.

3. God spoke clearest to man through Jesus Christ:

- In today’s Gospel, Jesus quotes the following prophecy from Isaiah: “*Your sons will all be taught by Yahweh*” (Is. 54: 13; Jn. 6: 45). In quoting Isaiah, Jesus meant to say: “Isaiah announced that one day God would instruct his people not

through messengers, but personally. The prophecy is fulfilled as you listen to me; I am the one Isaiah spoke about; I am your God and your teacher.”

- Jesus taught us about his Father, about himself and about the Holy Spirit; never had God revealed so many and so wonderful secrets to man.

Jesus revealed his Father’ plans to save us:

- He would forgive our sins and make us his children.
- He would communicate to us the Holy Spirit, God’s very life.
- He wanted us all at home in heaven with him, sharing his own life and joy.

Throughout his discourse in Capernaum, Jesus calls himself “*the bread of life*” (Jn 6: 35, 48), “*the living bread*” (Jn. 6: 51), and he concludes his discourse by saying that “*the words I have spoken are spirit and they are life*” (Jn. 6: 63)

Long before, when tempted by the devil in the desert to change some stones into loaves of bread to satisfy his hunger, Jesus had replied: *Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that God speaks.*” (Mt. 4: 4). These and *other sentences spoken by Jesus make it clear that God’s Word ought to be our spiritual food, and that through it, he himself becomes our nourishment.*

4. Only the Holy Spirit can help us understand God’s Word; pride hides its meaning:

We have read in today’s Gospel the following words of Jesus: “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him to me.*” (Jn. 6:44)

The meaning is: no person, no matter how intelligent and highly educated, has within him or her, the light that is needed to understand God’s word, and the strength needed to come to faith in Christ.

There are persons who know the Scriptures from beginning to end; people who have spent their whole life studying them. Often, their knowledge only adds to their pride, but does not bring them one step closer to God. The Scribes and Pharisee of the Gospel are a clear example of this.

On the contrary, let a person, no matter how unlearned, listen to God’s Word with a sincere and repentant heart, and the words of Jesus to his apostles will be fulfilled in him/her: “*The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.*” (Jn. 14, 26)

- We must be convinced that:

- We are unworthy that God should speak to us at all.
- By ourselves, we are powerless to grasp the meaning of God’s Word, and above all, of living up to its demands.

But the moment we listen to God’s Word with a sincere and contrite heart, the Holy Spirit makes up for our weakness. It is no exaggeration to say that this very

moment, the Holy Spirit is at work in me to help explain God's word, and in you to grasp my explanation.

- *On the other hand, there is no greater barrier to God's Word than pride:*

In the Gospel passage we heard, we find the leader of the Jews rejecting Jesus' message. On what grounds?

For the same reason for which the people of Nazareth rejected him: "Surely, *this is Jesus, son of Joseph...! How can he now say, I have come down from heaven?*" (Jn. 6: 42; Mk. 6: 3)

- God's Word implies love on God's part, and a humble and repentant heart on the part of man. The proud man will neither repent nor be grateful; hence his heart is a stony ground in which the seed of God's Word cannot yield fruit (Mt. 13: 5, 19)

5. We must feed on the Word of God often:

- The Word of God is not a food we can take or put aside at will; if we neglect it, we do so at our own risk.

Unfortunately, many of our Christian communities in the countryside are deprived of the Eucharist for months on end or during the COVID pandemic we could not attend the Sunday Mass. This makes the food of the Word of God all the more necessary for them to survive spiritually.

But even if a priest lives in our midst and we have the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist often, we must remember that the Eucharist itself will not yield fruit in us unless we first assimilate the food contained in the Word of God.

- The Church makes this point clear by prescribing the reading of the Scriptures as a preparation to the celebration of the Eucharist. Unfortunately, we do not attach to this reading the importance that it has, and that accounts for our slow progress in Christian life in spite of receiving the Eucharist so often. Some of us come late for Mass, once the reading and homily has ended!!

- We are still far from forming the habit of reading the Scriptures daily, possibly within the family, or in groups of people gathering in the evening to listen to the Scriptures being read. If the practice of daily reading the word of God were to become a common feature among us, it would make a tremendous difference in our Christian life!

- True, prayers like the Rosary or other prayers have their own value if well recited. So too the word of God. We shall do well to remember these words of a great bishop, Augustine by name: "*When I pray, I speak to God; when I read the Scriptures, God speaks to me.*" Now, which of the two is more important: what I wish to say to God in prayer or what God wants to tell me?

Some people show their love for the Scriptures by displaying the Bible in a prominent place in the house but seldom read it. What would you say of a family which on receiving a letter from their father living in a far away country, places it

with respect somewhere in the house, without caring even to open it and learn of its content?

Let us pray: Father, we thank you for having spoken to us and of doing it still through the Scriptures; remove all pride from our hearts; let your Holy Spirit give us light to discover your love and strength to live according to your will. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.