

Father O'Connor's Homily for 8 August 2021  
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

1 Kings 19: 4-8  
Ephesians 4:30-5:2  
John 6: 41-51

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. And the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

In the Gospel of John, we find a lot of underlying meanings. Water is not simply water, but a symbol of Baptism. Wind that blows where it will is more than wind; it stands for the power of the Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel, bread is not only bread. It is life. It involves hunger: hunger for God and hunger by God.

Many people, sadly, know physical hunger. But all people know spiritual hunger. When I ask people why they came to church, one of the main reasons they give me is, "I am here to get nourished so that I can make it through the coming week." Maybe that is why you came today.

So what are some of the "nourishments" available to us right now in this Mass? Let's recall a few.

The first nourishment is everyone who is here. Some people you know and others you don't. But we all felt that it was important to come to church today. We all belong, no matter how out-of-sync we are – physically, sexually, spiritually or emotionally. We all belong. Your hunger for family and meaning can be nourished here.

Second, every weekend we are reminded of our true identity: we are all disciples of Jesus. In a world where we are tempted to put on other people's faces and clothes and values, it is good to know that deep down – beneath the makeup and the toys – we can know who we really are. We are beloved children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. And this truth, which is higher and deeper than all the thin veneers that our culture imposes, nourishes our lives.

Third, we are nourished by a 2,000 to 5,000 year-old Scripture. We are inheritors of divine wisdom, the Word of God, that has nourished a long line of people from ancient times to our own day.

Fourth, we are nourished here by the Eucharist. Two thousand years ago, at the Last Supper, Jesus broke the same Bread and shared the same Cup as we do, and He told us to do this in His memory. And we do. We are connected to Him and with each other, and we are nourished with the Bread of Life as countless believers have been over the centuries and are today throughout the world.

These are nourishments that feed our gnawing spiritual hungers. But there is an additional powerful hunger to note, one that we are exposed to and reminded of every time we come here. And it is God's hunger for us, and this can terrify us. God is portrayed in the Scriptures and in literature as being like the Shepherd, the Seeker, and even as the Hound of Heaven. These images tell us that God is madly in love with us, and that God is hungry for our love and companionship.

In his marvelous children's stories, **The Chronicles of Narnia**, the great British Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, has a scene in which a little girl, Jill, comes face to face with the great lion. In the story Jill has been whisked away from her boarding school in England by magic. She is very thirsty and begins to search for water. Hearing a stream, she starts to approach it, but sees an enormous lion blocking her path. The lion's name is Aslan – who is a Christ-figure – and Aslan is directly between her and the stream. Listen to this passage:

It lay with its head raised and its two forepaws out in front of it. She knew at once that it had seen her, for its eyes looked straight into hers for a moment and then turned away – as if it knew her quite well and didn't think much of her.

"If I run away, it'll be after me in a moment," thought Jill. "And if I go on, I shall run straight into its mouth."

Anyway, she couldn't have moved if she had tried, and she couldn't take her eyes off it. How long this lasted, she could not be sure. It seemed like hours. And the thirst became so bad that she almost felt she would not mind being eaten by the lion, if only she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first.

"If you are thirsty, you may drink." For a second she stared here and there, wondering who had spoken. Then the voice said again, "If you are thirsty, come and drink." And she realized that it was the lion speaking.

Anyway, she had seen its lips move this time, and the voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way.

"Are you thirsty?" asked the lion.

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the lion.

"May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

The lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. "Will you promise not to – do anything to me if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step closer. “Do you eat girls?” she asked.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the lion. It didn’t say it as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I dare not come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the lion.

“Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the lion. No one who had seen his stern face could do that. And her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down and began scooping up the water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted.

A nice parable. It tells us that, sooner or later, we must give in. We must take the risk of kneeling down and drinking from the Way, the Truth and the Life. There is no other way, no other stream.

But we fear God, the Lion of Judah. We fear His love and, like Jill, ask Him to go away. We fear His hunger for our hearts and souls – that hunger which swallowed up so many people like Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta – because we would like to divide our hearts among so many other things.

Like Jill, we are both fascinated with and frightened by God’s love. And yet, coming here to church, we flirt with it and are exposed to it. And maybe someday we will become like that ancient desert father, Abbot Macarius, who, when he announced his decision to go into the desert and wrestle with God, his incredulous disciples asked, “And you hope to win?” And he answered, “No, I hope to lose.”

So we are here in church on a Sunday when the Gospel talks about hunger. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. And the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

We looked at nourishments we can find here: the nourishments of each other, our identity as disciples of Jesus, the Scriptures, the Eucharist – and the awesome presence of a lion-like God hungering for our love.

And I suppose it is to our credit that we still come here to church, knowing that each time we do, we move closer to the possibility of wrestling with God, and hoping to lose.