

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 19TH SUNDAY (B)
I Kings 19:4-8 Psalm 34 Ephesians 4: 30-5:2 John 6: 41-51

Dear Preachers:

The usual readings from Mark's gospel during this liturgical year have been interrupted for four weeks by a series of readings from John 6. In this chapter John is showing how Jesus, the Bread of Life, continues to nourish his followers. All those who are hungry will be fed by this Bread. Jesus fed the crowd's physical hungers, but we have deeper hungers, and God has gifted us with Jesus who feeds those hungers as well.

There is a journey motif in the first reading and an implied one in the gospel. The crowd that Jesus feeds and instructs in the desert is reminiscent of the Israelite trek through the wilderness when, through Moses, God fed and instructed the People. In the first reading, we are told that Elijah is on journey into the desert. Actually, his situation is dire. He has done battle with Israel's growing idolatry, and his warnings have enraged King Ahab and especially Jezebel, the queen. Jezebel seeks the life of the prophet and so Elijah has fled into the desert. Elijah is in a low state of mind; he prays for death. He feels alone in his ministry and forgets what we tend to forget as we look out and see the vast hungers of the "crowd"—that God can provide where our human energies cannot.

Elijah is in an inhospitable place where the surroundings cannot possibly give him the essentials for life. If the people are to be nourished by his ministry, God will first have to feed the prophet. Elijah isn't just physically hungry, he needs a renewed spirit, a desire to go on doing God's work. The angel of the Lord addresses both of Elijah's hungers --- the prophet receives food and the encouragement, "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!" I note that Elijah doesn't get a reprieve from his problems. He isn't told God will take them away. Instead, he is provided with food for the journey ahead. In the food he is given, the prophet is physically fed, but more, he gets a sign that God will care for him. God's feeding of Elijah prepares us to hear today's gospel.

First a word about the structure of today's gospel selection. In John 6: 41-51, we really have two sections coming together. The first ends with verse 47, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life." This first part emphasizes "believing." Jesus is saying he gives the life-giving bread from heaven. Indeed,

Jesus not only gives this bread, he is the bread. To "eat" of this bread is to have faith in Jesus, to take him in, and thus to receive life. Raymond Brown, among other biblical commentators, has described Jesus in John's gospel as Wisdom. Our faith in Jesus nourishes us, just as wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures nourished all who received it. Do we hunger for this wisdom? To accept Jesus, to take him into our lives and to live in accord with his life, is to live wisely.

This wisdom is not esoteric, reserved for just a few learned ones. It does not require learning obscure languages, customs, hidden truths and being initiated into strange religious practices. Rather, the wisdom Jesus gives is available and readily shared by the simplest persons, those who know their hungers and partake. "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to me." Jesus stretches out his arms and all are welcome to enter the embrace. We hear echoes from the Book of Wisdom, "Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom and she is readily perceived by those who love her. She hastens to make herself known in anticipation of human desire..." (6:12). The preacher will benefit from a reading of the Book of Wisdom in preparing today's preaching, for in his gospel John's shows that Jesus is Wisdom enfleshed.

In today's gospel, verse 48 begins a second part of the passage and the emphasis shifts. Now the focus is on "eat," "bread" and "flesh." The notion of "eating of this bread," stresses that here is real nourishing food for those who hunger. If the preacher has been looking for a chance to focus on the Eucharist, here is a chance. This second part of the discourse beginning with, "I am the bread of life," is emphasizing the sacramental food that brings us the risen Lord. Notice how this discourse has taken the place of any Last Supper eucharistic narrative in John. If you want to work with both of the sections of today's passage, note how the two messages parallel our Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper. The first part stresses the wisdom that comes to us through Jesus' wisdom,--- his teaching, his word to us. Thus, in the Liturgy of the Word, we have the presence of Christ himself speaking to us and giving us nourishment from heaven. We are invited to "eat" his word, for Jesus is our Wisdom. The second part shifts to the Eucharist, meal that unites us with Christ and one another and gives us the eternal life he offers.

Thus, Jesus is a new Moses, providing bread for the journey and the Word of God for our instruction. The people who confront Jesus are like the Israelites in the desert murmuring/complaining that they are not getting fed the way they had

expected. Is it possible that we too clamor for specific kinds of bread from God and miss the ways we are being more deeply nourished ?

There is a sobering wisdom for us in today's passages. Despite all our medical and nutritional advances, despite the years that have been added to our life expectancy-- we are going to die. What food must we eat to provide us with real life, a life that is deep, ongoing, never fading and always renewing itself in us? Jesus is offering us the wisdom and food we really need to keep us in a life that will not fade nor disillusion us. In John's Gospel, eternal life has already begun for the believer. The Eucharist, the bread of life, gives us God's presence now; the meal we share deepens this presence and makes it more and more permanent for us. It will not pass away. We will "eat" deeply of the life of God in heaven. But the Gospel today is also telling us that this meal has already begun for those who accept Jesus' teaching and eat "the bread from heaven."

The sacrament celebrates that God has nourished the People in their desert journey, as Elijah was nourished for his encounter with God and the task he had yet to fulfill. It celebrates too, that we are being given a share in God's life now and we will one day partake of it in fullness in an eternal banquet. For these realities, past, present, and future, we have reason to "Lift up our heart to the Lord" and say, as we do in the Preface that proceeds the eucharist prayer, "It is right and just!"

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent: The 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998. 129 pages, ISBN 1-56101-157-6. Three essays for preachers on the deluge of human words in our lives and the deep-down hunger we still have for the Word of God. Yet, often God seems silent. What is the preacher to do? Taylor is an excellent writer, her other books of sermons are a terrific read, as is this book. If I were going to read a book on the beach or at a retreat this summer, this would be it.

QUOTABLE

Perhaps there is no proof a famine exists except for the fact that people are hungry. In the land of plenty, the source of that hunger can be difficult to diagnose. It is often not until we have tried to ease it with everything else we know that we discover by process of elimination our hunger for God. Our problem

is not too few rations but too many. The proof that we are in the midst of a famine of the Word are the suffocating piles of our own dead words that rise up around us on every side. It is because they do not nourish us that we require so many of them. It takes thousands of words, coming at us every moment, to distract us from the terrible silence within.

—page 29, *When God is Silent*.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Walk in the Light: A Pastoral Response to Child Sexual Abuse: A Statement by the Bishops' Committees on Women in Society and in the Church and Marriage and Family (September 1995)

Some practical suggestions for developing simple action plans at the local level:
For parishes (many of these suggestions can be adapted for use by dioceses)

---Create an atmosphere of welcome, trust, and safety in your parish that encourages people to come forward: the abused, abusers, and all those affected by abuse, such as mothers who suspect that a friend or family member is abusing their child, as well as family members who may be in a position to offer support and security to the abused person.

--- Establish a procedure to respond when someone approaches a staff member about sexual abuse. Have available a list of referral agencies and resources to give to people who request help. Become familiar with state reporting requirements as well as diocesan policies concerning sexual abuse.

---Develop a network of people with expertise in dealing with sexual abuse. Regularly publish a contact's name and phone number in your Sunday bulletin.

---Mention of sexual abuse within a homily, when appropriate, let people know that the preacher is aware of the issue. This sometimes opens the door for people to seek assistance.

---Many abused persons and abusers turn to their parishes to find healing and reconciliation. Abused persons need justice and compassion; abusers need accountability, repentance, and support. A prayer service or special liturgical ceremony can help people as they set out on renewed lives.

---Develop programs to teach people about sexual abuse issues. For children, programs should discuss appropriate and inappropriate behavior and include suggestions on where to go if they think they are being abused. Programs for parents should help them to talk with their children about their bodies and the right to privacy, as well as about personal safety and self-protective strategies.

---Raise the questions of violence and the roles of men and women within the family as part of marriage preparation. Delicately introduce questions about how each prospective spouse was treated growing up, how their parents treated each other, and how they expect to act toward their spouse and their children.

---Promote the use of language in parish programs and materials that reflects the equal dignity of women.

---Share information and resources with other parishes and dioceses that are also trying to address sexual abuse issues.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Angel Guevara #0506556 (on death row since 6/20/96)
- David K. Williams #0440339 (7/23/96)
- Walic C. Thomas #0405380 (8/9/96)
- Melanie S. Anderson #0547364 (9/26/96)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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