

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time – August 12, 2018

- The readings we have heard today, and indeed the readings we hear at every Mass, are bits and pieces of much larger scriptural texts.
- Sometimes these readings stand on their own, or certain passages leap out at us and find their way into the hymns we sing:
 - “No one can come to me unless the Father draw them”
 - “I will raise you up on the last day”
 - “I am the bread of life”
- But these passages are also part of a larger story, they have a context that tells us something about their original meaning.
- And in fact, the less familiar passages are sometimes puzzling without some understanding of this context. For example,
 - why in the first reading does Elijah want to die?
 - what does “grieve the Holy Spirit” mean in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians?
- I have done a little work looking for answers to these questions and I would like to share what I have found and relate it back to the theme of nourishment we have also heard in the readings of the past two Sundays, and have heard in today’s Gospel.
- The first reading is from the first book of Kings, which is part of a series of books providing an account of the history of Israel organized in terms of its kings.
- The reading relates to a king named Ahab, who was not exactly a model king.
- He and his wife Jezebel encouraged the worship of a god named Baal. The prophet Elijah preached in opposition to this god. Elijah listened to, and followed the instructions of, the God of Israel, relentlessly challenging Ahab on his adherence to Baal.
- The first reading follows an encounter between Elijah and the priests of Baal in which they each invoke their god to light a sacrificial fire.
- The priests are spectacularly unsuccessful and dissolve into disarray when their sacrifice stays unlit.
- In contrast, the God of Israel lights the fire as soon as Elijah asks, which is followed by an untimely end for the priests of Baal for failing to deliver.
- This demonstration of God’s power is followed by another involving the sending of rain to end a long drought. However, Jezebel, Ahab’s queen, is unimpressed and in fact annoyed at the death of the priests. She threatens Elijah, who flees into the wilderness.
- Today’s reading picks up the story here with an exhausted, rather dispirited Elijah who, after doing all these things for God, finds himself a hunted man.
- So, it seems Elijah wants to die because he has had enough of fighting the good fight for God. He has helped God demonstrate his presence and power to the Israelites, he has vanquished the priests of Baal, but adversity still stalks him.

- But God knows this and sends him cakes and water to keep going on his mission to restore the kingdom of Israel to God.
- The second reading also deals with someone who is struggling to do God's will. Paul is writing from prison in Rome. He was likely imprisoned because his teachings offended members of the Jewish community and, from the Roman perspective, stirred up trouble.
- What's remarkable about this is that he continued to carry out his missionary work by writing with encouragement and instructions to the early Christian communities in places like Ephesus.
- And, in telling the Ephesians not to "grieve the Holy Spirit", Paul was talking about doing things that were contrary to the Spirit. In other words, he was saying, "Don't annoy the Holy Spirit by being bitter, angry or malicious with one another."
- Instead, "live in love", which is what Paul himself was doing, rather than dwelling on his imprisonment, which was undoubtedly very harsh.
- And then we come to the Gospel. As in the readings from last week and the week before, Jesus is talking about nourishing his followers in a spiritual sense, a sense that allows them to transcend the adversities of their physical being and find eternal life.
- This sense is powerfully expressed in hymns such as "I am the Bread of Life" and "Eat this Bread" and explains why they are so often sung not only to strengthen us in our living, but also to help us deal with the death of those close to us.
- A little over a year ago, my mother died. Today's readings connect to that event in a most remarkable way.
- My mother was a woman of unshakable faith and conviction, with a resolve to live life on her own terms. However, in the last year of her life, with her body failing her in so many ways, there were many reasons why she might have wanted it all to end.
- But she didn't. Far from it; despite the fact that she was physically fading away, she continued to seek spiritual nourishment all the more. She kept living until finally there was nothing more to do.
- One of the most unexpected results of her struggle was that when the end came, we her family accepted it as she had. There was no discord or disagreement among us and the arrangements for her funeral slipped easily into place. It was as Paul had counseled the Ephesians.
- And at her funeral liturgy, we celebrated her life with the Bread of Life.
- God gives us life, God sustains our lives and God provides for life after life. Bread for the Life of the World.

JMK