

Living Bread Sustaining Us Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/B August 12, 2018
10:00 AM 1 Kgs 19:4-8; Eph 4:30—5:2; **Jn 6:41-51** (Bread and wine now signify energy empowering life beyond the limits of time.)

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”

Jesus’ sublime teaching about the living bread is met in today’s story with disbelief and even derision, understandably so. The problem is clearly that ordinary language, **the language we use every day, cannot convey the sort of truth that Jesus is trying to convey.** When we try to use language to convey realities that our senses cannot perceive, we have to be creative. This is where we get **poetry, metaphor, myth, symbolism.** But if people identify reality with what they perceive and that’s it, then poetry and symbol and metaphor simply baffle them. And so the people today were simply baffled.

Jesus is describing himself in terms of bread, which means that just as bread keeps us alive on this physical plane, so **he keeps us alive on a higher plane that some people call heaven or the road to heaven.** The crowds object because they are listening with literal ears, and it doesn’t make any literal sense; that we have to grant them. So this would be a good time for them to pause, as it would be a good time for us to pause, and to question. But they keep going and they debunk, they murmur, they object. Sadly, this is too often people’s reaction to mystery. Some people feel the truth has to present itself to them on their terms. But **Jesus insists if we are to be free, we have to seek the truth on its own terms,** not easy. **It’s a big challenge. Are we up for it?** It is easy to dismiss or to criticize or to scoff. It is not easy to understand anything really about life.

Now in this reading, not only does Jesus present himself as the giver of eternal life, but he builds a bridge to himself by the use of this symbol, this sign, of bread. Long elements in the Jewish Passover celebrations, **bread and wine now signify energy empowering life beyond the limits of time.** Like the manna that kept the Israelites alive in the desert, this bread will keep us alive on our journey home to the Father, however long that takes. Jesus is trying to show that **God wants to be our companion on this journey and our sustenance as well as our goal.**

St. Paul says God’s will is to fill the universe in all its parts. And that’s easy except for filling

the human heart. That's not so easy for God. Why? Because **too many human hearts are full of rival self-will, and this excludes God and real love, substituting instead self-love.** Now in Judaism this was dealt with through the rite of Atonement. Atonement was a way that people could be cleansed of their self-will and self-love and turn to God. But the ritual of Atonement didn't work effectively. So **Jesus offered himself in atonement by pouring out his divinity to fill our humanity.** This changed humanity. **The coming of Christ into our world changed human nature itself.** It expanded it. It increased its abilities and powers and filled it with God, the true love that creates the world. **As the bread that comes down from heaven now, Jesus feeds us with that divinized humanity.** That's why in the Mass Christ says, "This is my body." It's not the priest's body; it's Christ's body. And that is what he is giving us so that we will be filled with the divinized humanity that he is.

Now St. Paul says, along with pagan philosophers, "In God we move and dwell and have our being." We dwell in God. But now **through Christ, the living bread, God also dwells in us.** So we dwell in God always; all creatures do, but now God dwells in us made in his image and likeness. This is the extraordinary and exquisite calling of the human race, to be a temple of God, a living temple of God. And Christian hope hopes, **we hope, that gradually God's relentless love will wear down and eventually wear out the selfish resistance that we call sin.** Pope St. John Paul said we should hope that eventually God wears down all sin, so that everyone is saved. Will this be accomplished? No one knows, but Pope John Paul said we should hope for this. But for believers in the meanwhile the new creation is already at hand in us, at work, real and alive. **For those who eat the bread that comes down from heaven, heaven and earth are joined together in what we can call a mystical marriage**—a mystical marriage: God's body, that is Christ's body, and our bodies together in a unity, mutual indwelling—a powerful idea. But you can see why the people found this hard to take.