

19th Sunday (B)

12th August 2018

'The new Manna from Heaven'

1 Kings 19: the Lord feeds Elijah

Ps 33: *Taste and see that the Lord is good.*

Eph 4: *follow Christ by loving as He loved you.*

Jn 6: 41–51: *I am the living Bread which has come down from heaven.*

In this year 'B' of the lectionary — as you probably know — we hear mostly from the Gospel of Mark in the ordinary Sundays of the year ... but as Mark is the shortest Gospel it won't quite stretch to the whole year. So for 5 weeks in the summer we hear passages instead from Jn 6, the great chapter on the feeding of the 5000 followed by Our Lord's discourse on 'the Bread of Life.' It's a wonderful chapter ... in fact, in many ways it's the heart of the Gospel. Certainly if I had to retain just one chapter of the whole of the NT I think I'd opt to keep this one!

Scott Hahn, when formerly a Prot. scripture scholar, admitted in his books that he would always miss out teaching Jn6, since he would have had to admit the Catholic understanding of the Euch. There are very few ways in which to understand these words of Christ in the Gospel other than in the way the Catholic Church teaches. Namely that Christ willed and intended to leave His very

own self — His very presence, life, and divine self — to us under a sacramental form, the Eucharist, the 'Bread of Life.' Catholic Tradition speaks of the 'Real presence.'

This is the greatest gift of Christ to His Church, for He leaves not just 'something' holy for us, but He leaves us Himself. He dwells at the heart of the Church, at the heart of each of our churches (tabernacle) and indeed in our own hearts when we are able to receive Him in Holy Communion. This is the living God, giving Himself to us in a way that we can receive — as our spiritual food.

It's interesting that, when we think of the Mass, the Eucharist, we tend to dwell most of all on the links with the Passover — the Last Supper began as a Passover meal, the elements used were unleavened bread and cups of wine, it took place as a sacrifice in analogy with the sacrifice that freed the Israelites at the Exodus, and in place of the Passover lamb, Jesus Himself is the Lamb to be offered.

But in fact, in this chapter on the Eucharist in Jn6 Jesus uses another element of the Exodus events to

highlight the sacrament that He will give, namely the ‘manna in the desert.’ The manna had been given by God as miraculous food to feed the Israelites in their 40yr nomadic time in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land. And it was fully expected that when the Messiah came He would bring the ‘new manna.’ This is why, the moment Jesus feeds the 5000, the first thing the Jews ask is for a sign: “our fathers ate the manna in the desert” ... what will *you* do? Jesus fulfils their expectations when He speaks of this new manna, this new supernatural, miraculous, food that will “come down from heaven,” ... food that will last to everlasting life. And this food, as He says, will be Himself: He Himself will feed us for everlasting life. He will do this, of course, because it is His *risen* body that is made present in the Eucharist, not His dead flesh, and therefore is already the food of the Resurrection.

Just as the manna was given by God, daily, for His people on the journey of the Exodus, so He gives us this ‘new manna’ daily as that which sustains us as His people

on the pilgrimage to heaven. We cannot do without it, and we should value each and every time that we are able to participate in Mass and receive Jesus’s sacred body in Holy Communion. This is the sacrifice and the food that makes best sense of what it means to be human, what it means to be alive, what it means to be a Christian longing for the conclusion of the journey to the Promised Land of heaven.

Let us remember each day that it is God Himself who feeds us for this journey — let us love and adore the Father who cares for us in this way, and longs for us to live up to the gift that He gives us in the Eucharist. Let us be sure to value the Mass, then, as the most perfect form of God’s infinite love for His people.