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Jesus is the bread from heaven -- but what does that mean?

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the first lesson this morning, we could easily have been impressed -- and I think should have been impressed -- by how God was careful to watch over the prophet Elijah. We can consider this lesson perhaps as a prefiguring of what Jesus does in the Gospel. God nurtures and feeds God's people, but this is even more of a revelation of that. It's not just a prefiguring of the Gospel. This incident is a way of showing who God is that is very clear, reassuring and consoling for us.

We will only understand that fully if we get the context of what was happening here. Elijah the prophet had been preaching against King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. He condemned them, and he, in fact, had entered into a contest with their prophets, who were paid by the king. He had defeated them, and because of that, he was hated. So he fled, but what we don't understand at first as we listen to this is that he was fleeing away from God. He was afraid for what he had done, so he was fleeing from God.

God had called him to preach to the people in the northern kingdom, and he was going exactly the wrong way. He was going against God's will, doing something wrong, and yet, look how God watches over him. As he begins to become hungry and thirsty and is just ready to give up and die, God sees that he is fed and nurtured. God's love is unconditional and never limited. Here, the prophet is defying God, and yet, at that very moment, God is watching over him with great love and tenderness.

That's a part of God that we worship. It's the God that Jesus preaches so clearly. In the Gospel lesson, we will see that this teaching is made very clear in what Jesus says today. "I am the Bread come down from Heaven." That disturbed those who were listening. "Who does He think He is? He didn't come

Nineveh's Sunday Morning
Full text of the readings

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalms 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 4:30-5:2
John 6:41-51

from Heaven. He is the son of Joseph and Mary. We know Him." Jesus insists. "I am the Bread come down from Heaven." Now, in the Jewish tradition, bread from Heaven and being fed by God, really means being nurtured, not just in our bodies, but that bread from Heaven is really the teaching of God.

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, there is a beautiful passage where God speaks about, "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways, for as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it yield seed for the sower and food for others to eat, so is my word. It is food come down from heaven that we can eat."

So we are to be taught by this bread from heaven. We understand it as the Holy Eucharist. It is the sign of God's love. Next Sunday in the Gospel, John will go on to make that even more clear, how this bread from heaven continues to be with us, Jesus alive in our midst, under the forms of bread and wine. Today, we should listen especially to this bread from heaven as the word to teach us. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we used to -- more often in the past -- refer to it as the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

By that, we meant that at this Eucharist, at the table, when we celebrate and we repeat the words of Jesus from the Last Supper, we are making present his life, death and resurrection, and we are called to enter into that. Of course, as we receive the Eucharist it nurtures our spirit life, but even more this morning, we must try to understand how it also teaches us, because the moment of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross is the most important teaching He ever gave. He was teaching us his way of love.

Even though he was hated, he had been tortured and he was being executed in a very shameful way, Jesus was loving those who were doing it. That's the teaching that Jesus provides for us, and it comes down from heaven as our bread, the teaching that should change our lives. Recently, we've had a couple of terrible things happen in our community of which we are probably all aware. There is a lot of crime and killing that goes on all the time. One of the things that seemed especially tragic was a few weeks ago, when a young man from Catholic Central High School murdered his own father.

That family responded with love, even to the one that had done it. Now, just a few weeks ago, very recently, another young man, a graduate honors student from [University of Detroit Jesuit High School], third-year pre-med student at Notre Dame -- one of his teachers told me he was extraordinary, but something terrible happened, and he's now being charged with murdering his father. These kinds of acts of violence are signs of what goes on in our world all the time: the wars, the killings and torture.

All of this that is happening is so violent and so contrary to the way of Jesus. It's so important for us -- I don't know what you do as a family when you're torn apart as those families must be, and I'm not sure how soldiers who kill in war can heal their own hearts. I'm not sure anyone who gets involved in such profound violence can be healed, and yet, that love of God is being poured forth because Jesus is the bread from heaven.

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If we listen to Jesus and let ourselves be formed by him in whatever circumstances in our individual lives and in our society and the world around us, if we really take to heart the message of Jesus as he pours forth his love upon us and proclaims that, "I, when I am lifted up from the cross, will draw all to myself through love," if we let that teaching of Jesus enter into our spirits, then we will most faithfully follow what St. Paul urges the Christians at Ephesus to do.

"Do not sadden the Holy Spirit of God which you were marked with. Do away with all the quarreling, rage, anger, insults and every kind of malice. Be good and understanding, mutually forgiving one another, even as God forgave us in Christ. As most beloved children of God, strive to imitate God. Follow the way of love, the example of Jesus who loves you."

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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