

Homily for August 10, 2003
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

1 Kings 19:4-8

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

John 6:41-51

We belong to and are fed by God's own self.

What an outlandish thing to say, really - "I am the bread of life...the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." No other founder of a religion made such a claim - so self-centered, so self-assured - not Moses, not Mohamed, not Buddha.

According to Saint John's gospel, Jesus is saying that in him and through him is found life - and not just any life, but fulfilled life, never-ending life, everlasting life.

The people around Jesus knew just how radical this was: "Do we not know his father and mother?" "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph?" "How can he claim to have come down from heaven? He came from down the street." The appearances confounded them. How can it be? He is familiar. How is it possible? He is so ordinary, commonplace. "How can he be from heaven?" He is flesh and blood like us.

Eucharist, like the Incarnation, is a scandal to empirical observations and technical reason. If that is our bottom line - only what we see and touch and feel is real - we may as well forget all matters of faith. Forget the matters of hope and love as well. Even the exhortation of Saint Paul - that we be forgiving, compassionate and imitators of God in our love - all that is sheer mindlessness if only seeing is believing.

Our contemporary struggle with belief in the real presence of the glorified Christ in the Eucharist is a quarrel over transcendence. Only the here is real. Only the now is actual. Only the observable is knowable. Only perishables can sustain us. The immediate feeling. The experience at hand. The pain pressing. The pleasure welcome. Our problem is not just believing that God could inhabit bread. It is believing that God could inhabit us.

We have trouble believing in anything transcendent about ourselves. Can anyone ever say, "forever," anyway? Is there anything possible left of us after our bodies decay? Is there anything more to us than satisfactions of power and money?

It may be difficult for modern minds to believe the proposition that God could be our food and drink. It is just as difficult to believe anything wonderful about ourselves, to hope that there is anything more to sustain us than matter chewed, drunk, and digested.

And yet our faith is just that - faith. Faith that there is more than surface and superficiality. Faith that the transcendent takes flesh. If somehow we have become locked in the state of mind in which "the real presence" is impossible to accept as a gift of God, nothing wondrous would be possible for us. There is no point to the journey, no answer to the quest of our

minds, no final satisfaction for the hunger of our hearts.

A mighty claim: God would be our food, our ultimate provision. God actually wants to inhabit our flesh, make us tabernacles - but more than tabernacles - agents of God's own spirit at work in the world. We are not mere passive receptacles of what we receive in Holy Communion. The food turns us into itself to become altogether new, empowered by God's own spirit. And think what a powerful profession of faith it is to believe this. Our "amen" is a radical assertion of dependence and desire. Our journey here to this body of Christ and to this bread and wine that become the glorified body are powerful statements of faith - this is where we derive our sustenance that must last the rest of the week and the rest of our lives.

Someone once said that we don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.

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God's own self.