

20th Sunday 2015

Introduction

It's a joy to return to Westernport to offer Mass here at St. Peter's. The last time I was here, I was the still-new Archbishop of Baltimore. Now I have a few more miles on my odometer and it's great to be back. Among the reasons I'm so happy to be here is that it gives us, all of us, the opportunity to express our common debt of gratitude to Father Ed Hendricks for his loving, generous, and effective service to your parish!

Bottomless Pit

Let's turn now to the Scriptures which tell us how God wants to nourish us, and let me begin with a very down-to-earth admission - and it's this: I'm hungry, almost all of the time. When I was a kid, my parents used to say that I was like a bottomless pit. As I grew older, I thought that my hunger pangs would lessen, but truth to tell, my appetite almost never fails me. Some of you might have similar experiences. Have you ever enjoyed a wonderful meal with good friends only to find yourself hungry a few hours later? Often, it seems, the more we eat, the hungrier we become. Today's Scripture teaches us that only the food God gives us satisfies our deepest hunger, the longing of our heart for God's truth and love.

St. Paul sets the stage for this teaching in today's 2nd reading taken from Ephesians. He is guiding us away from a carnal, earthbound, foolish way of thinking, the illusion that only earthly food and earthly pleasures will make us happy. When we fall for that old illusion, we find ourselves, St. Paul says, living in ignorance of the true food and drink and joy the Lord has in store for us.

The Book of Wisdom

In contrast to the ignorance of seeking only the food this world has to offer, the Book of Proverbs offers us another way. It teaches us that God's Word and Wisdom truly bring light and joy to our hearts. To help us see this, today's first reading presents God's wisdom as a lavish banquet. It takes place in a beautiful home complete with seven pillars, hearing this, we may think of the beautiful home as the Church where we listen to God's Word, and the seven pillars as the seven sacraments! The meat and wine which Wisdom prepares are the choicest; but Wisdom provides for us far

more than a gourmet meal.

Sharing in this banquet of Wisdom changes everything in our lives. It doesn't merely put food into our stomachs but rather true nourishment into our souls. It is a food that changes us; makes us different; enables us to understand. Wisdom says to us: "Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding"

So what is this food that Wisdom offers us? What is this meat and wine she prepares? The answer is the living Word of God. God's Word as it comes to us in Scripture and in the Church's Tradition. We learn this directly from Jesus. When Jesus in the desert fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, the devil tempted him with bread, but Jesus replied: "One does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). As Jesus went about preaching the Gospel, his disciples were worried about him and, at one point, they urged him to eat something. His reply must have astonished them: "I have food to eat of which you do not know..." At that point they thought others had brought him something to eat but Jesus was talking on a whole different plane, a spiritual plane, so he said: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and finish his work" (Jn. 4:34). Uniting our wills to God is what nourishes us, gives us life, and fills that void in our lives, that deeper hunger for a love that is true, unconditional and infinite.

The Word Became Flesh

But how does God's Word fill that void in our lives? How can ideas or words, even if divinely inspired, satisfy the longing of our hearts not only to be loved but to be infinitely and unconditionally? Here we are drawing closer to what today's Gospel is trying to teach us. It is trying to teach us that God's Word is more than words on a page or on our lips. Rather, as we profess in the Creed, the living Word of God is indeed God's own Son, the 2nd Person of the Blessed Trinity, who took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," St. John writes, "and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace & truth" (Jn 4:14).

Now we are truly ready to understand Jesus' words in today's Gospel when he says: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (Jn. 6:51). The

people who first heard these words rejected them. They couldn't see how Jesus could give them his flesh to eat. Not to put too fine a point on it, but eating human flesh seemed like a really bad idea. But Jesus wasn't talking about earthly food or carnal desires. He was talking about giving himself to us in a way that is true and real, becoming our true spiritual nourishment under the appearances of bread and wine. In today's Gospel Jesus was setting the stage for the institution of the Eucharist in which bread & wine are completely changed into his Body, Blood, Soul, & Divinity.

And what a beautiful thing: the Lord wants to take flesh in us, in the depth of our being! Through the Eucharist, Jesus, the Word made flesh, enables us to share deeply in the truth of the Gospel he preached and in the power of the sacrifice he offered on the Cross by which he overcame our sins and opened for us the way to everlasting life. This is how the Risen Lord remains with us through every circumstance in our lives. This is how he overcomes our foolishness and our sinfulness so that we might be prepared to live with God in the glory of heaven.

Conclusion

What, then, is our role in all of this? May I suggest three things? First is to ask for the grace to be renewed in our Eucharistic faith. If all Catholics truly believed Jesus' words in today's Gospel, no one would ever miss Mass - no one would ever want to miss Mass. Second, is to receive the Eucharist joyfully and worthily - free of serious sin through the frequent and fruitful reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Third, is to welcome the Lord into our hearts and ask him to kindle in our hearts a love so great that we will share with others the love he has first shared with us, especially by forgiving our enemies and loving those in need.

May God bless us, deepen our Eucharistic faith, and keep us always in his love.