

## THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B

In the gospel reading we continue to listen to Jesus' words to the people in the synagogue at Capernaum on the bread of life. After saying that he is 'the bread that came down from heaven' the Jews find his teaching unacceptable. But Jesus insists they must listen to his teaching and learn from it to come to God. The bread that Moses gave their forefathers to eat in the desert is not to be compared with the bread that Jesus will provide. In the first reading we hear how Elijah is sustained with the bread from an angel for his journey to the mountain of God. The second reading continues with Paul's teaching to the Ephesians to follow Christ by loving as he loved you.

The **First Reading** is from the first book of Kings, one of the historical books of the Bible. Books 1 and 2 Kings are a continuation from books 1 and 2 Samuel, indeed the first two chapters of 1 Kings which deal with the death of king David, are the concluding chapters of 2 Samuel 9-20. The two books of Kings deal with the reign of Solomon, 1 Kings 3-11, his wisdom, his riches, his building programme including the Temple. It was an age of peace but also of exploitation which aggravated the existing hostility between Judah, in the south, and the northern tribes, Israel. On Solomon's death his kingdom split in two and to the political secession of the northern tribes was added religious schism. This was a period of fraternal strife and attacks from outside; Egypt attacked Judah and the Aramaeans (Syria) attacked the northern tribes. This was only a prelude to the fall of Samaria, capital of the North, to the Assyrians in 721 and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 587, followed by Exile. Woven in among these accounts are the Elijah and Elisha cycles, the two great prophets of the period who had much to say about the religious conduct of the kings of the North. After the political division the kings of Israel are all judged guilty of abandoning Temple sacrifice and erecting a shrine of their own at Bethel, and only two kings of Judah receive fulsome praise. All this ran contrary to the teaching of Deuteronomy that the Temple alone was the place for sacrifice and that the nation will be blessed only if it respects God's covenant and it will be punished if it does not.

Our reading, 19.4-8, is from the Elijah cycle and needs to be put into context. We are in the reign of king Ahab of Israel, 874-853, who married Jezebel, a pagan woman who encourages the worship of false gods especially Baal. There is a drought in the land for which Ahab blames Elijah, but Elijah tells Ahab it is because they have deserted the God of Israel for Baal. Elijah summons all Israel and the 400 prophets of Baal to a sacrificial contest on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal cannot persuade their god to consume their sacrifice but when Elijah calls on Yahweh he immediately consumes Elijah's sacrifice. The people bow down to the ground and Elijah orders the false prophets to be put to death. The drought ends. The execution of the prophets of Baal rouses Jezebel's anger and she threatens to kill Elijah who flees for his life into the wilderness which is where our reading begins. Elijah is distraught and wishes he were dead but after food provided by an angel of God and sleep he has the spiritual and physical energy to walk to the mountain of God where he learns what God wants him to do.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 33.2-9, is another alphabetical psalm in praise of God's justice, chosen most probably because the last verse, which also provides the response, refers to food which the Lord provides. Otherwise the psalm is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving a suitable response to the food with which we are provided on our journey through life till we reach the mountain of God.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you have time read the whole of this wonderful letter, it's only six chapters long. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome (61-63 A.D.) and he follows what he taught in Colossians about the subordinate place of the powers of the universe by teaching that God 'has put all things under his (Christ's) feet and made him the head of the Church which is his Body, the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.' He then deals with the continuous problem of Jew and gentile. Salvation is a gift given by God through Christ and this salvation is available equally to Jew and gentile, this shows something of the infinite wisdom of the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. In the last analysis God's plans are seen to be fulfilled in Christ, and in the Church, the extension of Christ through history. This unity in Christ is incompatible with any lack of charity for their attitude to each other is the measure of their attitude to Christ in whom all are one.

Today's reading, 4.30-5.2, continues the theme from last week's reading about not living empty-headed lives. First Paul encourages us not to grieve the Holy Spirit, who keeps the one Body of Christ united, by doing anything that harms this unity. Paul then goes on to list behaviour which will grieve the Holy Spirit and destroy unity; rather we must be friends, forgiving each other readily. He concludes by urging us 'to imitate God' and 'to follow Christ by loving as he loved you,' and to make our lives like Christ's a fragrant offering to God.