

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Proverbs 9:1-6

Proverbs is the oldest of the Old Testament books which are classified as Wisdom literature. Although the entire book is attributed to Solomon (Proverbs 1:1), the book is actually a collection and was probably formed from the days of Solomon to the time of Alexander the Great. The book gets its name from the Hebrew word *masl* which means provocative saying. In the early stages, these sayings were short in form; later on they tended to take the form of a parable or allegory, or reasoned discourse. Being short and pithy, it was easier for people to remember them and this meant they were very useful in oral teaching; in fact, parents used them for teaching their children (Proverbs 1:8; 4:1; 31:1). The book of Proverbs divides into 8 parts, the first forming an introduction. Today's reading comes from this introductory part which has been called "The Initiation To Wisdom".

9:1 Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns;

Seven is the number representing covenant. There is no archaeological evidence to support the suggestion that seven columns surrounded the inner court of Palestinian houses at this time.

2 She has dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table.

Spices were mixed with wine to increase the flavor. Meat and wine are festive foods, bread and water the food of folly.

3 She has sent out her maidens; she calls from the heights out over the city: 4 "Let whoever is simple turn in here;

Those for whom the book is intended are the simple (Proverbs 1:4).

to him who lacks understanding, I say, 5 Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed! 6 Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding.

The Israelite would think of the promised banquet at the end times (Isaiah 25:6; 55:1-5). The Christian might think of the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14), and the messianic banquet at which Christ serves (Luke 12:37; Matthew 8:11). The Eucharist is itself a participation in the Heavenly Passover meal which we join at the third cup and look

forward to the fourth cup in the Kingdom of God.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 5:15-20

For the past three weeks we have been exploring St. Paul's moral section in his Letter to the Ephesians; the section which discusses New Life In Christ And In The Church. So far we have looked at the Call to Unity, Interior Renewal, and Christian Virtues. This week we learn of the Chaste Life Of The Children Of God. Being a Christian also involves being chaste (not celibate, but morally pure in thought) and walking by the light of Christ, which we received at baptism, and being full of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁵ Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil.

See 1 Peter 5:8-9.

“When Paul says ‘the days are evil’ he does not mean that they are created evil or that they are by their very nature evil. Rather he says this of the troubling events that occur in time. We are in the habit of saying, ‘I have had a terrible day.’ But that does not imply that the day of itself is intrinsically terrible. Rather it refers to what has occurred in the day. Some of the things that occur in it are good, as they are enabled by God. Some are bad, because they are brought about by evil willing. Therefore it is we humans who are the authors of the evils that occur in time. Only on this basis are the times called evil” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 18,5,15-17].

¹⁷ Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord.

The will of the Lord is God's will. The new life one receives in Baptism is characterized by a wisdom which contrasts with the foolishness of those who are bent on turning their backs on God (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-19; Isaiah 29:14). This wisdom, this sanity, stems from one's knowledge of the will of God and full identification with His plans. When a person's life is coherent with his faith, true wisdom is the result; and this immediately leads him to “make the most of the opportunity” (“redeem the time” in the King James Version). In fact, we have to make up for lost time. The Greek word translated as opportunity (or time), *kairos*, refers to the content of the point in time in which we find ourselves, the situation which it creates, and the opportunities which that very moment offers regarding the ultimate purpose of this life. “Making the most of” doesn't mean “not wasting a minute”, it means “using every situation and every moment” to give glory to God.

¹⁸ And do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery,

“It is good conduct that strikes fear in the wrongdoer. Only one who is sober is prepared to

counsel another realistically and with confidence. The person being counseled feels less resentment when he knows how good is the actual conduct of the one who admonishes him. But where there is intoxication there is also debauchery, and debauchery causes base deeds. Therefore it is our duty to be sober, so that the requirements of good conduct maybe observed” [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*, Ephesians 5,18].

In a pagan environment, so easily found then and now, one often meets people who think that happiness and joy can be attained solely in material things. Saint Paul identifies the source of true happiness – letting the Holy Spirit take over your soul.

but be filled with the Spirit,

“One drunk with wine sways and stumbles. But one who is filled with the Spirit has solid footing in Christ. This is a fine drunkenness, which produces even greater sobriety of mind” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 390-391), *The Sacraments*, 5,3,17].

19 addressing one another (in) psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts,

Because man is made up of body and soul, proper worship of God needs external expression (Acts 16:25; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13).

20 giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

“Everything that happens in life falls within the providence of God. He permits us to experience sorrows and joys, successes and failures. If a Christian acts in line with his faith, everything is success, even things which may be negative and the night that brings rest. ... For the rains ... Finally, we are thankful that we are born, that we have being, that our wants are sufficiently taken care of in the world ... In this way we give thanks when we are grateful for the benefits that come to us from God” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 436), *Commentaries On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 3,5,20].

Gospel - John 6:51-58

Last week we got to the point in our looking at John’s description of Jesus’ bread of life discourse where the Eucharistic theme had been reached “the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world” – the mystery has been revealed. This is the point at which we start today.

[Jesus said to the crowds:] ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven;

This is the third time (verses 35 and 48) that He identifies Himself as the Bread of Life. In Hebrew numerology the number three represents completeness. Jesus does not attempt to soften or alter His teaching. It is the literal meaning, not a figurative or metaphorical one, that He is trying to drive home.

whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

The Eucharistic theme has been reached; the mystery has been revealed (see also Hebrews 10:5-10).

⁵² The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?”

Many of the hearers have understood perfectly well what Jesus is saying and that He means exactly what He says, but they can't believe that what He says could be true. How can He give them His flesh to eat? Is He going to start carving up His arm? Others may have been confused by a Semitic figure of speech where to “eat someone's flesh” was to slander him (Psalm 27:2) (this is where we get the term “backbite”). If they had understood Him in a metaphorical, figurative or symbolic sense, there would have been no reason for them to quarrel. Just as Nicodemus thought of being born again in the purely physical sense (John 3:4), and the woman at the well thought only of natural water (John 4:11), so now the Jews understand the reference to His flesh literally.

⁵³ Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you,

We normally end our prayers with “amen” but Jesus begins His statement in this manner. Amen means “truly”, “so be it”, “I do believe”. The doubled amen is a solemn affirmation, an oath. When swearing an oath, the response was “amen.” The faithful and true witness is Christ, the Amen (Revelation 3:14). Since two witnesses are required to sentence someone to death (Deuteronomy 17:6), Jesus is bearing the part of both witnesses and alerting them that what he is going to say has life and death consequences. This is the fourth time He has reminded them that this is a life and death situation.

unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man

Recall that Son of Man is a term which Jesus applies to Himself, the New Adam (Daniel 7:13), the one who will effect the resurrection (Ezekiel 37). Jesus' words do not encourage any figurative understanding of His pronouncement, they only underscore the literal meaning.

and drink his blood,

If the idea of eating someone's flesh is repugnant, what about drinking their blood? To the

Jewish audience this would be even more repulsive. Blood was a forbidden food under the Law (Leviticus 7:27; 17:10-14), the penalty for which was to be expelled from the tribe; they would be excommunicated. "Flesh and blood" is a common Old Testament expression for life. When the two are separated, death results. By taking both, they must be partaking of a living being.

you do not have life within you.

Are dead, have no spirit.

54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood

He reiterates the bothersome statement without correcting it.

has eternal life,

A guarantee of life everlasting. If He had been speaking symbolically, He would have been commanding them to slander Him or suffer the pain of eternal damnation.

and I will raise him on the last day.

A pledge which only God can make

55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

If there had been any questions before, there is now no question at all that He is speaking quite literally.

56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood

In the first two instances (verses 53 and 54) where Jesus has talked of eating His flesh, the Greek word used for "eat" is *phago* which is a nice dainty word for eat; but from verse 56 on, the Greek word recorded is *trogo* which literally means "munch, chew, gnaw." So, what we have here is Jesus saying "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life ... my flesh is real food, and my blood is true drink ... whoever gnaws and chews on what is truly my flesh and drinks what is truly my blood remains in me and I in him."

remains in me and I in him.

This is covenant imagery. The term "remains in me" (abides in me) denotes marital unity; whoever does this remains part of His family. When people are bound by a common covenant, they are part of the same family (the two shall become one). A person may be cast out of the tribe for drinking blood, but in doing so in this case they are made a member of the Body of Christ; an even bigger and more important family. By eating His body and

drinking His blood, they are partaking in the family meal which binds them together. John 15:4 utilizes this same covenant imagery.

57 Just as the living Father sent me

What kind of life does the Father have? A spiritual and immortal one; God is not mortal.

and I have life because of the Father,

The Father and Son are one (John 14:10-11; 5:21-24); they share a life with the Holy Spirit (John 1:32; 15:26). They are a common union (communion).

so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.

Will share His eternal life. The Christian shares a communion with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). How is this communion shared with Christ and the Christian community? The same way every family shares communion; by sharing a common meal – the Eucharist. This is the fourth time, in four verses, that Jesus has said they must eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. The number four in Hebrew numerology stands for the world in its entirety (four winds, four cardinal points of the compass). The Eucharist is God's gift to the whole world. With this rapid four-fold repetition, it's almost like Jesus is saying "what part of 'eat' and 'drink' don't you understand?". God is not stupid; when hearers misunderstand Jesus, He corrects their misunderstanding immediately (see John 3:3-6 for example, where Jesus corrects Nicodemus' understanding of "born again" and explains that it is not a physical rebirth but a spiritual rebirth through baptism). Here, no correction is made because no misunderstanding exists.

58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

This is the third time in this discourse (verses 31-32 and 49) that Jesus compares the true Bread of Life, His own Body, with the manna God used to feed the Israelites every day during their forty years of wandering. That bread was only a faint type of the Eucharist, the sacrament of life. It sustained them for 40 years, this will sustain them through eternity.