

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34 (33); Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

The one who eat this bread will live forever

PART II

[Jesus said] 48 *“I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*

51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

59 *He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is the second last Sunday when we read from John 6 and this time the “cutting” of the text is not quite so bad. The excerpt should run really from v. 48 onwards and v. 59 is a very important confirmation that this is a homily.

Even though this text is very focused on Jesus and may seem distant from ordinary life, nevertheless, the starting point has to be something within our lived experience, thus providing a foothold in the familiar to open up the gospel passage. At the same time, it is impossible not to think of the Eucharist, even though the text is really about the death

of Jesus. Nevertheless, perhaps the best way to reflect on it would be to think of the Eucharist as offering participation in, a communion in Jesus’ journey to the Father, through death and resurrection. As one Eucharistic Prayer expresses it, “we join our life to his, a perfect prayer of boundless love.”

KIND OF WRITING

As before, this is an early Christian sermon. We are in the second part of a reflection on a biblical text. The main text is a version of Exodus 16:4: ‘He gave them (i) bread from heaven (ii) to eat.’ The first part of the homily reflected on “bread from heaven” and this, the second part, reflects on “to eat.” See again the chart on the next page.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The background continues to be the story of the Manna in the desert. According to the biblical narrative, God sent the Israelites manna for forty years in the desert (see Exodus 16 and Numbers 11). The manna gained an extra significance in Judaism at the time of Jesus, as we see from Philo of Alexandria, who writes:

Again this heavenly food of the soul which Moses calls manna, the word of God divides in equal portions among all who are to use it; taking care of equality in an extraordinary degree. And Moses bears witness to this where he says, “He who had much had not too much, and he who had but little was in no want;” since they all used that wonderful and most desirable of proportion. On which account it happened to the Israelites to learn that each of them was collecting not more for the men who were related to him than for the reasonings and manners which were akin to him. For as much as was sufficient for each man, that he was allotted in a prudent manner, so as neither to feel any want or any superfluity. (Philo, *Who is the Heir of Divine Things* § 19)

Thought for the day

One could launch the reflection by recalling significant situations in which the costly gift of self nourished others, leading perhaps to the gift of new courage and new life. Christians believe that Jesus gives life by giving himself. This is also the path of discipleship—the believer also gives life by the gift of self. Such memories may lead to the real heart of what is being said here: faith in Jesus and the meaning of his death and resurrection. At this point, questions arise such as, what is at the centre of my life? What give me nourishment and energy? How has that actually taken place in my own, quite personal journey? It might even help to come up with a personal faith statement at this point. Above all, this is an invitation to faith, understood as deep, deep trust. In the words of another text, we believe God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19).

Prayer

You are the mystery at the heart of it all and at the heart of your mystery we find self-giving, sacrificing love.

Help us to know you as you truly are and as you have shown yourself to be in Jesus your Son.

We ask your blessing as we follow your Son Jesus, our bread of life. May we in turn be able to nourish others.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

“To eat” needs careful understanding. In John’s Gospel, frequently a first level of understanding is offered, usually a crass misunderstanding, which is then used to lead the reader (and perhaps the protagonists within the narrative) to a deeper understanding. Three examples may suffice:

Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4)

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me

Outline of a Rabbinic Homily and John 6:31-39	
Beginning: <i>The bread that came down from heaven</i> (Ex 16:4, 15)	6:31-33
PART I: <i>He gave them bread from heaven</i>	6:35-47
<i>Subsidiary citation: Is 53:14</i>	6:35
PART II: <i>to eat</i>	6:48-57
Ending: <i>The bread that came down from heaven to eat</i> (Ex 16:4, 15)	6:58-59

this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4:15)

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life (John 6:52-53)

Clearly, rebirth is not physical – it comes from the Holy Spirit, from above. Clearly, the water Jesus is offering is not physical, but a spring of life from within. Equally clearly the word about eating the flesh of the Son of Man is not meant physically. The meaning lies on another level: allowing yourself to be nourished by the self-gift of Jesus and in that sense “eating.” Several reasons can be given for this reading: (a) it is this faith in Jesus which is the real problem addressed in John 6:52-53, echoing the problems of Jews and some disciples about the incarnation; (b) the key moment in this Gospel is the lifting up of the Son of Man, when he gives himself; (c) the climactic question of John 6 is found in v. 68 “To whom shall we go?”; (d) flesh means the whole humanity of Jesus, as we see from “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

ST PAUL

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. (Galatians 2:19-21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 48 This opening sentence (not in the lectionary reading) resumes the

heading of the second part of the sermon. I AM = God’s name in the Old Testament and a very important component of the theology of the Fourth Gospel.

Verse 49 Notice: *your* ancestors—i.e. the Jews are being addressed here. The contrast is established between the transient nourishment offered in the time of Moses and the lasting nourishment offered by Jesus.

Verse 50 A positive statement contrasting with v. 49. It introduces the second part of the homily reflecting on “eat”. We are dealing here with the “fleshly” self-giving of Jesus on the cross.

Verse 51 I AM forms part of a list of such sayings: the resurrection and the life; the true vine; the good shepherd and so on. It reflects the high Christology of the writer which caused problems not only for Jews, in the synagogue “across the road”, but also for some disciples within the community. The flesh means the self of Jesus, underlining his human condition.

Verse 52 The symbolic language is open to misinterpretation and this is what happens, in a typically Johannine way: is this cannibalism? The reader is meant to react something like this: “If this is *not* the meaning, what is the message?”

Verse 53 The Johannine Jesus compounds the shock and paradox. The difficulty being faced by the writer could well be that there are people taking part in the Eucharist who have not faced the saving reality of his humanity and death.

Verse 54 The real shock and paradox are constituted by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Verse 55 “True”: Jesus is also the true light and the true vine. True in this sense is a relational term—in the way that lovers are “true” to each other.

Verse 56 Abiding in Jesus, i.e. having his relationship with God within the heart of each believer is a key to John’s

Gospel (John 1:32-33, 38-39; 2:12; 3:36; 4:40; 5:38; 6:27, 56; 7:9; 8:31, 35; 9:41; 10:40; 11:6, 54; 12:24, 34, 46; 14:10, 17, 25; 15:4-7, 9-10, 16). It is translated by different words in English.

Verse 57 I.e. the one who has faith in me lives because of me or from me.

Verse 58 As summary statement, as usual at the end of a homily, repeating the descent of the “bread from heaven” and the need “to eat” of it.

Verse 59 The writer reveals the homiletic context of this material. Capernaum was mentioned earlier, though not the synagogue (John 6:17, 24).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In John’s Gospel, the author frequently presents people as misunderstanding what Jesus says. Jesus then uses the mistake to lead his hearers to a deeper understanding of his teaching. When have you found that clarification of a misunderstanding helped you to greater wisdom or deeper faith?

2. Recall some treasured gifts that you have received. Then think of people who gave you something of themselves. Is it not true that such a gift outweighs any material present? When have you received such a gift? To whom have you given this gift?

3. In this gospel faith is not a concept but a relationship. Faith leads us to believe in Jesus and to trust him who gave his life for us. As you look back on the development of your faith, what has helped to increase your trust in Jesus so that you believe that you are never on your own no matter what difficulties arise in your life?

4. Jesus promises that those who come to him will have life. In what ways have you found that believing in God’s love, and believing that Jesus came to tell us about that love has been life-giving for you?

PRAYER

Wise and gracious God, you spread a table before us and nourish your people with the word of life and the bread from heaven. In our sharing of these holy gifts, show us our unity in you and give us a taste of the life to come.

We make our prayer through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Be careful then how you live, making the most of the time

Eph 5:15 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, 20 giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading for today, although somewhat generic again, does not lack directness. Certainly expressions will certainly ring a bell while others will function as invitations. The many related texts given below may help us to get into this passage in all its richness.

KIND OF WRITING

The long section from Eph 4:17 to 5:20 is a further contrast of the Two Ways. This is very apparent in our reading above with its contrasting vices and virtues. The style was familiar at the time through the Stoic philosophers. The section concludes with 5:15-20, offering a more general exhortation.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

We all face choices and we all seek wisdom. The risks of inattentive living are clear: lack of wisdom, living for the moment, distracting ourselves with food and drink, amusements etc.

RELATED PASSAGES

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. (Ephesians 1:15-19)

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. (Ephesians 4:17)

Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:13)

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. (Romans 13:11-13)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Galatians 1:3-5)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 Lit. be careful *how you walk*, that is, pay attention to your lifestyle and your ethics. In this faith context, to be wise means to discern the will of God. Cf. Eph 5:10; Ps 111:10; Prov 1:17; Mt 10:16.

Verse 16 This verse strikes a strong apocalyptic note: the days are *evil* and the time is *short*. A very similar expression appear in Colossians: *Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time*. (Colossians 4:5). Make the most of time means doing good and being loving. The verb used for “make the most of” (*exagorazomenoi*) means lit. “to buy up at the market place”. Because “when they’re gone, they’re gone”?

Verse 17 Precisely: *Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord*. (Ephesians 5:10)

Verse 18 The unexpectedly precise mention of drunkenness is most likely linked to the practice of a variety of sects at the time which used alcohol to induce ecstatic states (not unknown today!). Cf. the same confusion at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:12. The disinhibition triggered by alcohol also led to unseemly behaviour (also not unknown in our own time!). In any case, it is no substitute for the joy we experience in the Holy Spirit.

Verse 19 A window on music in early Christian prayer/worship. Psalms are so called in Greek because they were accompanied by plucked instruments. Hymns were sacred songs. Songs (lit. odes) in general could be anything poetical, in this case requiring the adjective “spiritual” to make the use in worship clear.

Verse 20 The instructions in v. 19 are brought to a natural climax in thanksgiving (*eucharistoutentes*), that habitual prayer of Christians. A grateful heart is the fundamental disposition of all who have come to believe all that God has done for us in Jesus.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The passage invites a reflection on my conduct and behaviour in the various sectors of my life: family, work, faith, environment.
2. Time is a uniquely human category and we are often very aware how fleeting time is. This does not mean we have to be frantic workaholics. But it may mean an awareness of good use of time for work, for family, for leisure and for prayer.
3. Giving thanks stands are the heart of our life and worship. For what do I, at this present moment in life, give thanks to God?

PRAYER

All we have and are is yours, O God. May we always acknowledge you and come before with hearts full of thanksgiving. As we join in the Great Thanksgiving, join our prayer to the prayer of Jesus, a prayer of perfect praise. Amen.

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine

Prov 9:1 Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
2 She has slaughtered her animals,
she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
3 She has sent out her servant girls,
she calls from the highest places in
the town,
4 “You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
5 “Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
6 Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading is well chosen for at least two reasons. The prologue of the Fourth Gospel is modelled, in part, on hymns to Wisdom from the Old Testament and here the topic of Wisdom returns. Furthermore, Wisdom is often personified as a woman (“Lady Wisdom”). Culturally, this echoed the role of women as home builders (house), nurturers (food) and companions (love). In that way, Lady Wisdom was a metaphor: in her we encounter God, who brings us home, who sustains us and who loves us. It is a great strength of the Wisdom books that a feminine image is used of God. While the relationship between God and Wisdom varies, in some books Lady Wisdom is the mind of God (an arresting thought, if you pursue it).

KIND OF WRITING

Within the Wisdom books, there is a style called *tractate* wisdom (e.g., Job) which really means longer, more scholarly reflection on Wisdom. Often in tractate wisdom, personification is used and we meet the figure of Lady Wisdom (contrasted with Dame Folly). The writings are nearly always in the form of poetry, showing the usual parallelism.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Proverbs is made up of various collections. Sometimes these are just what you would expect, i.e. proverbs. But the first part of the book is a rather scholarly exhortation to Wisdom (chapters 1-9).

- I. **1-9** *The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel*
- II. **10:1-22-16** *The proverbs of Solomon*
- III. **22:17-24:22** *Give ear, listen to the*

- sayings of the sages* (change of style)
- IV. **24:23-34** *The following are also taken from the sages*
 - V. **25-29** *Here are some more of Solomon's proverbs, transcribed at the court of Hezekiah king of Judah*
 - VI. **30:1-16** *The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh, of Massa*
 - VII. **31:17-33** *Numerical Proverbs*
 - VIII. **31:1-9** *The sayings of Lemuel king of Massa, taught him by his mother*
 - IX. **31:10-31** *The Perfect Housewife*

It goes without saying that these writings come from different periods and reflect a corresponding variety of concerns.

RELATED PASSAGES

The key texts for *Lady Wisdom* in the Bible are: Job 28; Proverbs 1-9; Sir 24; Baruch 3:9-4:4 and Wis 7:7-9:18. A few excerpts below from Baruch 3-4 (late Wisdom material) may give a flavour.

Learn where there is wisdom, where there is strength, where there is understanding, so that you may at the same time discern where there is length of days, and life, where there is light for the eyes, and peace. Who has found her place? And who has entered her storehouses? (Baruch 3:14-15)

But the one who knows all things knows her, he found her by his understanding. The one who prepared the earth for all time filled it with four-footed creatures; the one who sends forth the light, and it goes; he called it, and it obeyed him, trembling; the stars shone in their watches, and were glad; he called them, and they said, “Here we are!” They shone with gladness for him who made them. This is our God; no other can be compared to him. He found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to his servant Jacob and to Israel, whom he loved. Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humankind. (Baruch 3:32-37)

She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die. Turn, O Jacob, and take her; walk toward the shining of her light. Do not give your glory to another, or your advantages to an alien people. Happy are we, O Israel, for we know what is pleasing to God. (Baruch 4:1-4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Wisdom, in the Ancient Near East, was regarded as the organising principle, holding everything created in being. It had different names, such as *hokmah* (Hebrew), *ma'at* (Egyptian), *sophia* (Greek). This rich cultural background was also associated with the *logos* (word), used at the start of the Fourth Gospel. The house of wisdom has seven pillars, i.e. it is perfectly constructed (though not quite Palladian!).

Verse 2 Wisdom is a hostess, who recognises the hungers of the heart and prepares accordingly.

Verse 3 Wisdom invites through messengers. These are probably the teachers and scribes who preserved and spread the tradition.

Verse 4 This might not seem like a very enticing invitation, but it is an acknowledgement of need. The same invitation is issued by Dame Folly and the two women can be hard to tell apart.

Verse 5 Bread and wine, i.e. the staples of human nutrition and celebration. It is chiefly for this verse that this reading from Proverbs has been chosen.

Verse 6 Two lines in slightly irregular parallelism. Who wouldn't like to lay aside immaturity and live? The key to such “life in abundance” is in v. 6b.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Every so often, we encounter people of wisdom, who inspire us again on the road to God. Remember one such person in your life and give thanks.
2. The invitation to wisdom is found in all cultures and faiths. When did such longing awaken in me? How do I nourish my own question for wisdom and for God?
3. Wisdom is not just for the head but also for the heart and for life. There is joy too in walking the path of life, the way of insight. Can I recall such life-affirming happiness in my faith?

PRAYER

Wise and generous God, you know how much we need your guidance, love and hospitality as we make our way through life. Send into our hearts the Holy Spirit of Wisdom, that we know the great gifts of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34 (33); Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

READINGS 1 AND 3

In the Jewish tradition, as we see from Baruch, Wisdom was equated with the Torah (the Pentateuch), as the source of wisdom for living. Even more, as we see from Philo of Alexandria, the manna was interpreted as the Torah, again as the source of everything wise. So, with a little bit of background knowledge, there is more to the first reading and its anticipation of the Gospel than merely the metaphor of food.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 34 (33) makes an excellent response. The refrain is even better: *Taste and see that the Lord is good.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Proverbs 9:1-6

Here is a delightful invitation to Wisdom, portrayed as a woman. She invites us to her home, into her presence, so that we may walk the path of insight and enjoy life in abundance.

Second Reading

Ephesians 5:15-20

We all have to make choices, especially choices about the quality of life we would like to have, the kind of life we would like to lead. Here's an invitation not to sleepwalk through life, but to stay awake and be fully alive.

Gospel

John 6:51-58

Today's Gospel puts before us an essential question: Where do we look for nourishment in our lives? We all need such nourishment...but is it the real thing? Its not just a matter of receiving communion; rather it is a question of where my treasure is, because there my heart will be.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 19 August

St John Eudes

Ezekiel 24:15-24

The prophets are called sometimes to

illustrate their teaching with an action. This is perhaps the most disturbing prophetic gesture—and the message could hardly be clearer.

Matthew 19:16-22

A failed calling is always tough to listen to. It does remind us that we become disciples not because *we* choose it but rather the *Lord* chooses us.

Tuesday 20 August

St Bernard, abbot and doctor

Ezekiel 28:1-10

Today we hear a fierce critique of absolute rulers who set themselves up as gods over their people. "Being swollen with pride," they are now severely corrected by God.

Matthew 19:23-30

The "eye of an needle" is not to be allegorised (there was no such "gate" in Jerusalem). Instead, we have grossly exaggerated image to make the point with wit and inescapable clarity.

Wednesday 21 August

St Pius X, bishop of Rome

Ezekiel 34:1-11

Ezekiel—whose ministry took place just before and then during the great Exile in Babylon—read that disaster as punishment for the total failure of leadership, both political and religious. He is very hard (rightly) on the shepherds who feed themselves instead of feeding the flock.

Matthew 20:1-16

Our parable today has not lost its capacity to shock and disturb. Originally, it was aimed at those who objected to God's gracious inclusion of Gentiles in his plan of salvation.

Thursday 22 August

Our Lady, queen and mother

Ezekiel 36:23-28

Eventually, Ezekiel comes to the question of renewal and restoration. In a marvellous passage he describes this as a conversion of heart, achieved not by human effort but by God alone. Long before transplants were thought of, Ezekiel portrays God as a heart surgeon.

Matthew 22:1-14

To "get" this parable, it is vital to hear it on two levels. There is the level of the historical Jesus, using traditional festal and nuptial imagery for the kingdom. There is the level of church, looking back and what actually happened to Jesus, the messiah and prophet.

Friday 23 August

St Rose of Lima; St Eugene, bishop

Ezekiel 37:1-14

We need a double lens to listen to this reading. First a political lens: the vision is a parable of restoration after the disaster of the Exile in Babylon. In other words, another generation will rise and return. At the same time, the metaphor of resurrection works only because some people were already coming to some kind of faith in life after death.

Matthew 22:34-40

In a memorable encounter, Jesus goes to the heart of the Gospel of love. This great teaching is never, ever "out of date."

Saturday 24 August

St Bartholomew, apostle

Apocalypse 21:9-14

What will heaven be like? Using a rich array of metaphors—marriage, jewellery, a city, the twelve tribes and the Lamb of God—our reading offers a stunning, vibrant and inviting portrait.

John 1:45-51

In this Gospel, the spread of the Good News is a kind of wildfire, with one person drawing another in. Symbolically, the fig tree referred to knowledge of God and evil and hence to the Torah which gives us this knowledge.

