**Homily for the 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**August 8, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: 1 Kings 19:4-8 (God provides food and drink to sustain Elijah.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 34 (Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 4:30-5:2 (Be imitators of God, and live in love.)*

*Gospel: John 6:41-51 (I am the bread that came down from heaven.)*

In last week’s gospel, as Jesus began his “Bread of Life Discourse,” the crowd seemed to be a little slow on the uptake, but more than willing to listen. They asked questions of Jesus and genuinely sought to understand his message. But, as the discourse continues today, St. John reveals that some people in that crowd were actively opposed to Jesus and his teaching. Throughout his gospel, John refers to such people as, “the Jews.” In this passage, as in many others, they are said to “murmur” about Jesus. The word is the same one used in the Old Testament to describe the Israelites “grumbling” against God and against Moses in the desert. This verb signifies an *attitude* as much as an action. Those who “murmur” or “grumble” demonstrate that their hearts are hardened. And, in the case of those who murmur about Jesus, that hardening of the heart may be a fatal condition.

Jesus says, over and over again, that he has been sent by the Father to give eternal life to all those who believe in him. He is the bread that has come down from heaven. He will give his flesh for the life of the world. However, Jesus indicates that faith in him is not as simple as just listening to his teaching, seeing the signs that he works, and then choosing to follow him. The Father must *draw* a person to Jesus. In other words, faith is a *gift*, more than a personal choice. Still, one must be open to receiving the gift. Jesus says, “Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.” He doesn’t state the obvious corollary, though: “Those who refuse to listen to the Father will just as surely be repelled by Jesus.” The people identified as “the Jews” are those who refuse to listen to the Father. Like their ancestors who ate manna in the desert and still grumbled against God, these critics of Jesus have closed their hearts to the truth and closed their ears to the Father’s voice. As a result, they are unable to put their faith in Jesus, regardless of the many signs that they have seen.

The Gospel of John, even more than the other three gospels, focuses on this question of faith, and the mysterious interaction between personal faith and divine grace. With every miraculous “sign” that Jesus works, characters in the stories are challenged to listen to that voice of the Father calling them to believe in Jesus. At the same time, we readers of the Gospel are motivated to reflect on our own faith. The fact that some characters are moved to faith, while others are not, should prompt us to look at our own faith development and ask how we came to believe as we do today.

In the Catholic Church, we often speak of “instilling” the faith in the next generation. What we usually mean by that is the process of sharing our faith with our children. Through a combination of teaching and example, we share what we believe and how we celebrate and live our faith, in hopes of planting a seed of that faith within our little ones. Then, over time, the seed needs to grow and develop into a mature faith. Unfortunately, as we know all too well, some people reach that point of mature faith, while others do not. Parents will often torture themselves wondering where they went wrong. They did everything they could, yet some of their kids ended up abandoning the Catholic faith, anyway. Even more puzzling, some of their children may become devout Catholics, while others who grew up in the very same household become agnostics or atheists, rejecting the faith that their siblings have embraced. It’s all very confusing and mysterious, until we consider Jesus’ words: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him.” Jesus is suggesting that much of this process of faith development depends on the Father’s outreach and each individual’s ability to respond to that personal gift. Third parties, like parents, teachers and Pastors, certainly can play an important role, but they cannot determine the outcome.

As much as we would like to implant our faith into our children and see a perfect copy of our own faith blossom in them, that’s simply not the way it works. Faith begins as a gift from God. Our Heavenly Father implants into the heart of every person a seed of his truth, and an innate desire to know and love the Source of that truth. Over time, the Father gently draws each one of us to himself and to Jesus, the One he sent into the world to save us. Those who have learned to listen for those subtle promptings recognize the Father’s voice and respond to it. And this is where the influence of parents, teachers and Pastors comes into play. They are the ones who train us to listen to the Lord’s voice when we are still young and impressionable. They teach us by their advice and by their example. Their witness helps us to trust our own experiences of God, those special moments when the Lord reaches out to us to draw us closer. When we murmur and grumble, demonstrating the hardness of our hearts, these witnesses of faith encourage us to quiet the voices of discontent and doubt, which constantly surround us, so that we may listen to the Holy Spirit moving within us. The Tradition of the Church also helps us enormously. The grace of the sacraments, together with the testimony of our ancestors in the faith, strengthen our resolve to keep listening, keep growing, and keep moving forward on our journey of faith.

Jesus makes clear that faith in him is not an end in itself. The Father draws us to Jesus for a truly glorious purpose. His desire is not merely that we attain *knowledge* of God, or *belief* in Jesus as the Son of God, but that we might enjoy *eternal life* with God. That is the goal. Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, but still died. Jesus is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat of it and *not die*. The Lord gives us this “living bread,” his very self, for our salvation. And so, we come to the banquet of his Body and Blood. We come with open hearts, not murmuring and grumbling against God, but singing God’s praises and offering our prayers of thanksgiving. Like Elijah, who was exhausted by the first day of his journey, but then strengthened by heavenly food to go another forty days, so we feed on the Lord’s flesh and blood and continue on our journey, all the way to eternal life.