

Vespers Homily

The Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost
August 9, 2015

2 Samuel 5-9, 15, 31-33

Psalm 130

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You may have noticed that the three readings each Sunday, and sometimes the Psalm, usually have a common thread. Apparently, somewhere in the process that created the Prayer Book and the Lectionary, someone gave thought to such things. That is to be commended. Then there are weeks such as this when the thread is really hard to find.

In the Old Testament reading we have the sad story of the fate of Absalom, the son of King David, who raises a rebellion against his father. Absalom is smart, good-looking with great hair – that’s important – compassionate with the people of Israel, and terrifically popular.

He and his army actually drive David from Jerusalem into exile. David regroups, and his army, in turn, defeats Absalom; and Absalom, fleeing on his mule, is caught by his great hair in the branches of a tree. David’s military leader and his soldiers find him suspended there and despite David’s orders that Absalom be spared, kill him. Naturally, David is sad.

That's really all there is to that story. I was hard-pressed to find a relevant moral to speak of except, perhaps, the readings in the Old Testament are not for the faint of heart, so I turned to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

Paul is, as always, full of morals. In this instance he seems to be dealing with some real division in the Christian community at Ephesus. Forming a Christian community in Ephesus might be called Paul's crowning achievement. Ephesus was a city in which all sorts of gods were worshipped. Paul has found that all pagans are not the same; they do not necessarily like each other. Paul's key words are falsehood, anger, evil talk, bitterness, wrath, wrangling, and slander. Clearly, all is not well with the Ephesians. Thank heaven there is nothing like that in Christian churches today.

In the first reading, there is a story and no moral; in the second there is a moral and no story. So let's talk about bread.

Literary friends tell me that all good stories contain an element of tension, of conflict. There is that element throughout the New Testament, particularly in the four Gospels. The tension is always between Jesus and the Jews, be they Pharisees or Sadducees or the members of His own synagogue at Nazareth. The tension is that the Jews are absolutely unable to understand what on earth Jesus is talking about. They simply cannot communicate.

At least part of the problem is that Hebrew, which the Jews understood, is a very concrete language. The word "tree" means a tree; the word "bread" means a loaf of bread. When Jesus uses the word "bread" in this reading, they can see it only in those terms.

So when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty," or, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," He loses them completely.

Actually they know about bread coming down from heaven. That bread was “manna,” a mysterious bread-like substance that rained down upon the Israelites in the desert in their Exodus from Egypt long before. It was physical bread to sustain their physical bodies, no more. And they ate the manna, and they lived out their lives, and they died, and that was that.

Jesus tells them that He is not speaking of a physical bread. He tells them that if they had paid the least bit of attention to the prophets of Israel, they would know that he speaks in spiritual terms. God now gives them that spiritual bread, a bread that will sustain them here in this life and in a life eternal; that bread is to be found in the presence of Jesus. He is the embodiment of that spiritual bread; if they believe in Him, partake of Him, they will have that.

The bread of life and the living water, the body and blood of Jesus, are never depleted, never less.

We are about to partake of that spiritual bread.

In the bread and the wine that will be consecrated, we receive the “bread of life” and the “living water,” just as Jesus promised.

In His Holy Name.