

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

August 8, 2021

1 Kings 19:4–8 • Ephesians 4:30–5:2 • John 6:41–51

I.

Having lived in Richmond for seven years,
and after having passed it countless times,
I finally toured Historic St. John's (Episcopal) Church in Church Hill.

As often happens,
it was the visit of a friend that prompted me to visit that landmark on Monday.

It was well worth the visit.

At St. John's Church,
Patrick Henry delivered his famous "Give me liberty, or give me death" speech.

The setting was the Second Virginia Convention, held in March 1775,
as the conflict between the American colonies and Great Britain was escalating.

Patrick Henry was a respected lawyer from Hanover County
and a vehement defender of colonial rights and liberties.

Now he proposed the formation of a militia in Virginia.

He took to the floor arguing that war was imminent,
and that action was needed.

Then, he famously declared,

"Is life so dear, or peace so sweet,
as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?
Forbid it, Almighty God!
I know not what course others may take;
but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

II.

Patrick Henry's words had an impact,
in that moment and beyond.

Historians credit his speech with helping to ensure
that the American colonies were united in their struggle against the crown,
and that it did not become only a regional conflict.

But it's sobering to realize that words, however stirring,
don't always have that kind of impact.

That seems to be the case in today's Gospel,
which is the second installment of the Bread of Life Discourse
that we're reading during August.

Christ has told the crowd that he was sent to give life to the world.

But the crowd's response is to downplay his words:

“The Jews murmured about Jesus because he said,
‘I am the bread that came down from heaven,’
and they said,
‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph?
Do we not know his father and mother?
Then how can he say,
“I have come down from heaven”?’”

Jesus doubles down on his claim.

His mission is that of a word:
to reveal the Father—God—to the world,
and in that way to nourish humanity:

“Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.
Not that anyone has seen the Father
except the one who is from God;
he has seen the Father.
Amen, amen, I say to you,
whoever believes has eternal life.
I am the bread of life.”

Then, in the closing words of today's reading,
Jesus identifies himself and his mission with the Eucharist:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven;
whoever eats this bread will live forever;
and the **bread** that I will give is my **flesh** for the life of the world.”

The Eucharist **is** Jesus Christ.

The Eucharist is not just a sign or symbol that helps us to think about Jesus;
it is Christ himself.

Sadly, recent polls indicate that only 1/3 of Catholics in the United States
actually believe that.

According to the teaching of the Council of Trent (1545–1563),
which met in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation,

“In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist
‘the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ
and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained’”
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1374).

The Eucharist is the person and mission of Jesus Christ:
crucified, died, risen, and ascended.

The celebration of Mass renews—it makes present—the
death and resurrection of Christ (no. 1362).

That renewal is the same offering of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross;
and we participate in that offering (nos. 1366–1367).

We offer our lives in union with Christ's sacrifice (no. 1368).

That's the significance of the bread and wine brought forward
and placed on the altar (no. 1351).

The renewal and offering of Jesus' sacrifice
means that bread and wine are changed into Christ himself:
“transubstantiation,” as it's called (nos. 1374–1375).

That's why we ring bells at the consecration:
to remind ourselves and to announce what has taken place.

After the consecration,
Christ is “truly, really, and substantially” present
in the consecrated bread and wine (no. 1376).

That's why we genuflect upon entering before the tabernacle (no. 1378).

And that's why we bow our head before receiving the Eucharist (no. 1378).

In the Mass,
we offer and then receive Christ as the sacrificial victim (no. 1382).

The altar is the both place of sacrifice and the table of the Lord (no. 1383).

That's the highlight of our week as Catholics:
to offer Christ in the Mass and to receive him in Holy Communion.

To say “Amen” to the Eucharist is to say, “I believe”
to what Christ and his Church teach about the Eucharist,
and about everything else.

St. Paul says that we must be prepared—
we must be properly disposed—
to receive the Eucharist;
otherwise, we condemn ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:29; no. 1385).

We do not have to be perfect to receive the Eucharist.

We only have to be free from serious sin,
which separates us from God and from the Church.

If we have committed a serious sin,
we must first be reconciled through the Sacrament of Penance
(*Code of Canon Law*, canon 916).

The Church also asks us to fast from food or drink for one hour
before receiving the Eucharist,
in order to prepare ourselves (canon 919 §1).

(The fast is commuted to 15 minutes in the case of a medical condition [canon 919 §3].)

And the Church explains that our demeanor and dress at Mass “ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1387).

III.

Christ’s words about the Eucharist point to his mission as the Word—the one who brings God to us.

“The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

That Bread of Life is Christ—nourishment for our lives.