

Sunday 19. 2018

Do people still use the expression “putting on airs”? It meant that someone was pretending to be more than he or she was. It usually referred to a person who had come from nothing, that is, from a non-monied and non socially prestigious background, and was now attempting to pass himself or herself off as being part of a monied and socially prestigious world. When people heard of such a person, their normal reaction was: “What! I knew him, or I knew her, when they had nothing and were nobody.” We called such people social climbers, and we didn’t like them. On the other hand, talent will out, and people who have talent and achieve often come from very poor backgrounds, and when that happens we simply recognize the fact that this person had talent and it eventually proved itself.

Our Gospel today starts out as an argument between those who think they knew Jesus when he was nobody and Jesus who is now claiming to be from heaven, from God. So it is a “they said” and “he said” argument. They say: “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? How can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” And Jesus answers: “Stop murmuring among yourselves.... 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.” Jesus is not denying that he came from Nazareth and people there knew his family, but at the same time he is claiming that it is God himself who is acting in him and drawing people to him, and that he comes to give people life here and hereafter. And he uses the image of bread to explain his role as the life-giver because his audience can identify with God as the one who feeds people because of what their scriptures have taught them, that God fed their fathers in the desert. However, Jesus now distinguishes between the bread, the manna, given in the desert to their fathers, and himself. People who ate the manna died, but people who will follow him, who will accept him as the bread from heaven, from the Father, will experience themselves as living both here and even in and after death. A tremendous claim! Worthy of one who describes himself as coming from above, from the heavens.

This Gospel today is therefore teaching us that if we accept Jesus as the bread from heaven, we will find life both here and hereafter. We can find this theme in the other two readings as well. In our first reading the prophet Elijah is on the run. You may remember why. King Ahab of Israel and his queen Jezebel were worshipping a god called Baal, not the God of Israel. Elijah rejected their

rejection of the true God and challenged Baal's priests. "Build an altar and slaughter a bull on it and then ask Baal to accept your offering by sending down fire on it to consume it," Elijah tells the priests of Baal. They do so but no fire comes down from heaven. Then Elijah builds an altar, slaughters a bull on it, drenches the altar and the surrounding trench three times with water, and fire comes down and consumes the offering. Then he has the priests of Baal killed. Jezebel, enraged at the defeat of her god and the slaughter of her priests, is going to kill Elijah. He flees for his life but then gives up and sits down under a bush and asks for death: "This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers." But God will not let him die. "Get up and eat," God tells him. He does so and walks to the mountain of God. Life prevails over death.

Our second reading for today describes what life looks like here and now on this earth among those who accept Jesus as the bread from heaven. Among them, we are told, there is to be no bitterness, no fury, no anger, no shouting and reviling, and no malice. Instead there is to be kindness, compassion and forgiveness: "Be imitators of God," Paul tells the Ephesians, "as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma." Live in love.

That is what the lives of those who accept the bread of heaven look like. They live lives of love.

Three years ago Pope Francis applied this message of life and love to the environmental situation in which we find ourselves today. We are not being loving in our treatment of our environment, of our earth, of our beautiful planet, he wrote. We are misusing our planet, the gift God created so that he might create us. As the title for his letter Francis used words taken from St. Francis of Assisi's Canticle to the Sun, "Laudato Si, mi Signore, Praise be to You, my Lord." Francis of Assisi saw the earth as our sister with whom we share life and as our mother who opens her arms to embrace us. This sister and mother, Pope Francis writes, is now looking more and more like a pile of filth because of our misuse of her. The problems are immense and the solutions hard to find or, when found, to make use of. But for the moment it may be enough for us to recall the fundamentals of our Faith: we are to live in love, and we are to love our planet, our earth, as our sister and mother, and we can do that only when we treat each other as sisters and brothers, for as Pope Francis reminds us in this letter, "We are faced not with two separate crises, on environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental."

It is summer, a beautiful time of year for us here in New England. All is in bloom. It is time for us to whisper an extra thank-you to God for our lives and our planet which supports us. It is time to celebrate the God of life who has given us not only this beautiful planet but also his son who teaches us to live lovingly with each other and promises us life not only here but also hereafter in a world renewed and perfected.