

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 23, 2009  
5:30 pm Liturgy**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**For the past three Sundays, the entire month of August really, we have been treated to a rather extended meditation on the meaning of Eucharist in the sixth chapter of John's gospel. We have heard Old Testament stories of how God will never forget that we are hungry. Not just hungry in the literal sense—for food and drink—but hungry in ways we may not even have imagined yet. God will provide food for us. (The whole past month of readings has been an unpacking of what Joshua says today: "...it was the Lord who performed those great miracles before our very eyes...") And all month Jesus told us repeatedly and in numerous ways that *he is*, in fact, the food God will provide. It is heavy stuff for the dog days of summer!**

**But while you have been up here (in the upper church) presumably trying to make some sense out of all these dense passages, I've had the pleasure all month of being downstairs with the children at the Family Mass. For most of us it has been a fun trip. It is still easier to imagine marvelous banquets God prepares for us when you can watch scenes from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* where dishes dance, and candlesticks sing, and the food is, as Garrison Keeler might say, always above average.**

**So I want to challenge our own imaginations as adults this afternoon. It might make Eucharistic belief and understanding a little easier for all of us. After all, Jesus did suggest on at least one occasion that we had a lot to learn about faith from the children.**

**Imagination is the key. We will never fully comprehend the meaning or mystery of the Eucharist. But imagination holds the key to any mature understanding. As I again realized downstairs with our little children how important imagination was and is to all these stories about the Bread of Life, I was confirmed by something in a book I was reading just last week. It is called *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace* by Father Bill Barry, S.J. Some of you probably know Bill. He is considered by many a rather wizened guru of the spiritual life (though I'm not sure he would appreciate that description of himself). He writes: "But you need to remember that the only way God can communicate with you is through your imagination—and your memories, insights, and thoughts." *Imagination!***

**Downstairs with the children, we were able to *imagine* this motley crew of hungry Israelites grumbling (grumble, grumble, grumble) against Moses and Aaron in the desert. And then watch God send quail in the evening (so they would have enough time to barbecue the little birds) and mana (or pita**

bread) in the morning so they could make quail sandwiches for their journey (tastes just like chicken). Can we imagine that upstairs?

We were able next to *imagine* poor Elijah, totally exasperated, completely exhausted by being a prophet, and wanting to just die under his broom tree. So I sat under a broom and watched the kids laugh. But their imaginations got it. Can ours?

And then finally we heard that wonderful consort of God, Wisdom, tell us last week that the food God prepares for us is really not just bread and water but a full-fledged banquet. One that we will all share in the final victory of God in Christ. And a banquet of which we have a foretaste every time we gather for Eucharist together. Imagine that! Can you?

Meanwhile, all month Jesus has just been saying: *I am* that Bread of Life. It is my flesh and blood that brings eternal life. And whenever you eat and drink, remember me for I am with you—always, until the end of time. And that final banquet which is God’s Promise to Israel and to us all—is me. This is where *Beauty and the Beast* actually does make sense. Can we imagine it? That is what Eucharist is about. A foretaste of “the big event” to which we are all invited and destined.

But in today’s gospel story, Jesus realizes that lots of people around him

are walking away. They can't imagine what he is saying. And even some of his close disciples walk away saying: "for heavens sake, this can't be true." Peter, in an unusual outburst of insight, says back: "But for heavens sake, this does make sense." "You have the words of eternal life." You are from "above." Above not meaning "up in the sky." But "above" meaning you are from a different realm of reality, the ultimate "spiritual being," the Messiah of God—and more.

And then Jesus says to them: and so are you all. You are all "from above," and to there you shall return. What you call heaven is here on earth, and earth is now in heaven, because of who I am and what I am doing for you. (This is John's Jesus speaking. And he is just about to lay down his life—and take it up again—for heaven's sake.) And nothing is just what it appears to be.

It is this that Jesus' contemporaries could not believe and understand. Not just his talking about himself as flesh and blood. But his assuring them they were not really who they thought they were. They were full members of God's family, "spiritual" beings, destined for eternal life in Christ Jesus. Not only are *things* not what they appear to be—like bread and wine—but *no one* is what he/she appears to be either. We are children of a single parent, one God, and will be for eternity in Jesus.

**Imagine that! And taste and see the goodness of the Lord!**