

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Exodus 16:2-4.12-15 / John 6:24-35)
01.08.2021

The image of the *manna* – the *bread from heaven* given to nourish God's People on their exodus journey – has long been associated with the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is suggested that just as the manna was necessary for the sustenance of the Israelites' life during their years of desert wandering, so the reception of the Eucharist is necessary for our sustenance in the Christian life as we make our pilgrim way through the world. Indeed, it is *vital* for us to be nourished by the Eucharist – the sacrament of the Lord's abiding presence. And the word I used – *vital* – is a strong one. It implies that without this nourishment we would die! Next to our need for water comes our need for food. Just as we need to eat good nourishing food for our bodily health and well-being, so we need to be fed at the Eucharistic Table for the maintenance of our spiritual health and well-being.

The fact that *God gave His people food from heaven for each day's need* in the Exodus story speaks to us of the Lord's fidelity in regard to those whom He called from slavery in Egypt and was leading towards the Land of Freedom. The daily nourishment provided was a remarkable sign of God's providential care. The people's daily dependence on the Lord sought to lead them to grow in a relationship of trust in regard to the Lord and also in regard to God's servant Moses, called to lead them on their desert journey.

We cannot but link the idea of confidence, trusting dependence upon the Lord's provision, and the gift of the Eucharist. This leads me to think of Jesus' teaching in chapter 6 of Matthew's Gospel – with its call addressed to us to live one day at a time, rather than worrying about the future, constantly running ahead of ourselves, concerned about tomorrows which might never dawn. Jesus was adamant that His disciples should learn to live in the here and now of each twenty-four hours.

It seems to me that the first Scripture reading heard this morning (the Exodus 16 text) with the instructions it gave about the collection of the manna each morning serves as a reminder to us of the *one day at a time* approach to life which we would do well to adopt. Saying that, I find myself recalling an insight shared by the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 3 of his Book of Lamentations. Therein Jeremiah wrote: *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.* What we have there is a call to look to the Lord with the dawn of each new day. This obliges us to keep communion with the Lord alive in our hearts all along life's journey.

If we live on the basis that what we need for each day is given to us, then we learn to keep live in unremitting trust in the Lord. We come to realise that incessant confidence in God's help is required of us and when we live that experience of life is enhanced. In contrast, if we attempt to live without the Lord's help we soon find ourselves *running on empty* and before too long we crash, our lives grind to a halt.

If in today's first reading we heard of the feeding of the hungry people of Israel with bread from heaven as they made their way through the desert, in today's Gospel passage, our attention is directed towards the bread Jesus gave to His disciples and to all who followed Him. The bread is spoken of as *True Bread come down from Heaven*. This was the Bread Jesus shared with the hungry and it is the Bread He still gives to us today. In His *Bread of Life Discourse* Jesus alludes to the gift of the manna offered in time past and then He goes on to say: *My flesh is the true bread come down from heaven; it is bread given for the life of the world.* He states: *Your ancestors ate the manna and they still died, but whoever eats this bread will live for ever.*

The Eucharist is the sign of the Lord's abiding presence with His pilgrim people; an abiding presence which is forever eluding us! That the presence of the Lord is forever eluding us is so important for us to understand. The Lord who makes Himself present to us remains sovereignly free. He cannot be encapsulated once and for all. He cannot be retained under lock and key.

The gift He makes of Himself is one that comes to us each day with the dew-fall – just like the manna that was given for food in the desert.

That image of the dew-fall is an important one. The link between the gift of the Eucharist and the manna given in the desert with the fall of the dew is evoked at every Eucharist at what we call the *Epiclesis*. Just think of the wording of the Second Eucharistic Prayer when the priest extends his hands over the gifts: *Make holy these gifts, O Lord, we pray, by sending down Your Spirit upon them like the dew-fall, so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.*

During the Exodus the manna was given each morning with the fall of the dew. We are told that the manna was collected after the dew had fallen lifted from the camp. Once the moisture evaporated a strange substance remained behind – this strange substance was considered to be heavenly food.

If natural dew-fall yielded food from heaven for the Israelites on their pilgrimage through the desert, so, for us, in the Eucharist, the dew-fall of the Holy Spirit called upon the bread and wine means that these gifts become for us the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. The *Epiclesis* precedes and makes possible the change wrought in the gifts brought before the Lord for consecration when the words of the Institution are spoken of them.

The gift of the Spirit should be understood as a constantly renewed gift of God's grace; a blessing that has to fall afresh upon us day after day in order to bring about God's work for us and God's work within us.

We have to remain close to the source of life, which is God's Spirit; and we have to remain close in an unrelenting way if we are to know the life to which we are called.

It seems to me that stemming from all I am saying one central question should be at the forefront of our minds when we gather for Eucharist. The question we should ask ourselves is this: *Do we well and truly depend upon the Lord for what we need to live?* Gathered here to celebrate the Eucharist, we should ask ourselves: *Do we see the Eucharist as well and truly vital for our Christian lives?* Or, have we perhaps become a little blasé in regard to the extraordinary gift bestowed upon us here? That is perhaps a risk and a downside to our having such ready access to the Eucharist. We can become just so used to it that we take it for granted and fail to appreciate the marvellous blessing bestowed upon us here.

A great Bishop and Doctor of the Church, St Ambrose of Milan, wrote the following lines which I found myself recalling as I read today's Scripture texts: *What is greater? Manna from heaven or the Body of Christ? The Body of Christ, of course, for He is the Creator of heaven. In addition, those who ate the manna died, but he who eats His Body, it will become for him the forgiveness of sins and he shall not die forever.*

Clearly for Ambrose the manna given by God in the desert was a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. However great the Old Testament miracle of the manna was, Ambrose considered it to be but a pale image of something much greater that was yet to come: the very mystery we celebrate as we gather here this Sunday morning; the Sacred Mystery we celebrate day in and day out in our daily Eucharist. What we live gathered around the Holy Table far exceeds what the Israelites were given to enjoy during their desert march to freedom. The Eucharist is *a new mystery; it is a much greater and all the more wonderful mystery.*

There was a Jewish tradition that when the Messiah would come a new miracle of manna would accompany his appearance. This would be the sign of the Messiah's having arrived to be with God's people to offer them comfort. The Church sees this strand of the Jewish people's expectant hope as having been fulfilled in the gift of the Eucharist which Christ confided to His disciples.

Significantly, the Church speaks of the Eucharist as *viaticum*: that is, *food for the journey*. Literally, *viaticum* means *with you on the way*. The word *viaticum* stems from the words *via* (that is, *the way*) and *tecum* (that is, *with you*). To say that the Eucharist is *Viaticum* is to say that in this sacrament the Lord is *with us on the way*. It is good for us to think of what we celebrate here this morning as the Lord being with us... being with us on *the way*. And we know from the Acts of the Apostles that Christian discipleship is *the way*. The Christians were known as *followers of the way*.

Might I suggest that the word of God heard on this Sunday should lead us to ask ourselves whether or not we are truly accepting of and living to the full the present moment in our lives; whether or not we are truly with the Lord in the here and now of our existence. He is always with us, are we always with Him?

I suspect some of us would have to admit that we can be and often are elsewhere than in the present, elsewhere than in the *here and now*. I suspect many of us are not really present to ourselves and/or to others and/or to the Lord.

Where are you? That was a question asked in the Garden of Eden. We must ask ourselves: *where are we?*

So easily we can be living in the past – hearkening back to it; or else we can be running ahead of ourselves into the future, trying to escape both past and present.

The call addressed to us is to live in the today of our life – and to do that each and every day. It is to see God at work in our lives – making Himself available to us with the dawn of each morning, sustaining us, providing for us, giving us what we ask for in the prayer our Saviour taught us: namely, *our daily bread*. Fittingly we never receive the Eucharist without first reciting the words of the *Our Father* – be that in the context of the Eucharistic celebration (when we gather for Mass) or when we receive the Lord in the Rite of Communion outside of Mass (when we are given Holy Communion of the *viaticum*, for example). Always we recite: *Give us this day our daily bread*. That prayer request reminds us of is the Lord's desire to provide for us at every level of our being.

All that I have evoked this morning wants to make one essential point really. It is that the manna image of the Eucharist is so important, for it speaks to us of God's graciousness renewed every day; His generous free gift of Himself, which, if we understand it properly and welcome it fully, will lead us to make a generous, gracious, free gift of ourselves in our turn.

What Jesus said at the Institution of the Eucharist stands. We will hear it anew this morning: *This is my Body given for you. Take this and eat. Do this in memory of me.* Those words engage us to say that we are now Christ's Body, called to be given in such a way that the gift we make of our lives nourishes and sustains others, blesses them and comforts them. We are meant to understand that the gift of our life is nothing less than an expression of Christ's love revealed to us in the mystery of the Eucharist, nourished within us as we approach the Lord's Table at Holy Communion and meant to be brought from this place into every encounter of our lives.