

Proper 13 Year B 2021

The first reading, from the Book Exodus, gives an account of the gift of manna in the wilderness - the bread that God gives his people. The reading from St John's Gospel which we heard last Sunday - the feeding of the five thousand - deliberately echoes the Moses story, as did the second half of last Sunday's reading - Jesus coming to his disciples walking over the water. That story echoes the miracle of the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians, as they cross the Red Sea. It all points to Moses - the sea, the wilderness, the feeding. So is Jesus a new Moses, 'the prophet who was to come into the world'? The people seem to think so - they want to make him king.

Jesus tries to tell them that this 'sign' was not a re-enactment of something which Moses did then, but an act of God now, something in the present. The people quote Psalm 78 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'. This is a long psalm which tells the story of the Exodus; we have said a few verses from it this morning. The people's faithlessness is not ignored. Yes, 'they ate and were filled,

for he gave them what they craved', but also 'despite all this they went on sinning'.

Jesus is trying to show the people that there is now a new Exodus, a different form of Exodus. God is offering the people what they need, not what they want (there is a difference between need and want). They are being offered a bread which will satisfy for life, and a new journey to a new type of freedom. The bread which Jesus is talking about is not manna from heaven to satisfy our cravings - but the living bread which is Jesus himself.

Today's Gospel reading comes from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel - as did last week's - and so will our readings for the next three weeks. This chapter is quite repetitive, John is really hammering home the point - but the chapter does warrant continuous reading, instead of the sound bites we have, in order to appreciate the various nuances. John's Gospel is written with a very broad scope, unlike the patchwork of stories and incidents in the Synoptics. Episodes (in John) are followed by a developed discourse or dialogue which explains the meaning of what John calls 'signs'. Thus in Chapter 6 we have the story of the miraculous feeding and the walking on water and then a commentary on the

phrase 'bread from heaven', (of which we have had the first part today, and it will continue next week), and then there is a commentary of what it means 'to eat' this bread, which we will hear in two weeks' time. It is almost as if John is trying to explain to his readers the meaning of the Eucharist.

At the beginning of today's Gospel reading the people are chasing after Jesus, looking for more food, and for the man who has fed them - the one they wanted to make king. Jesus tells them 'You are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves'. The signs of Jesus are meant to lead you to the true food - the food which is Jesus himself. What matters is not what miracles he can perform, but who he is. Only if you are prepared to be confronted by that, in a new way, can you begin to understand what he can do for you, what he really wants to do for you. Jesus tells us that he is the one on whom God has set his seal, to show that he has not only come from God but carries God's authority, which is why the wind and the waves obey him. The crowd- we - must learn that we cannot just expect bread on demand - give God our shopping list, which is how many people seem to pray. To receive the food which endures, we have to

believe in Jesus. It seems odd that, having been fed, the very next day the crowd demands another sign. It is a request that Jesus ignores. Instead he invites them to look for something better than daily bread, to look for bread for life, bread which will satisfy our greatest hungers. At the feeding the bread had been so abundant that twelve basketfuls had been left over. That is how God gives - abundantly - abundant life, love, mercy, grace. Life enrichment.

So, in this new Exodus, which way are the people to turn - to more rules and regulations, more observances and rigid practices? No, simply believe. All God wants is that we believe in Jesus, for he is the great gift that has been sent into the world - the rest will follow from that belief.

After 20 centuries, we need to discover once more that the whole strength and originality of the church lies in believing in Jesus and in following him. We have succumbed, it seems to me, to the belief that if we do the right things, that is enough. Lots of people who have never heard of Jesus do the right things. What we need to do is focus on living as disciples of Christ. Christian identity lies in learning to live a way of life that is born of a living and trusting

relationship with Jesus. We grow in faith as we learn to think, feel, love, suffer and live like Jesus. To survive in today's secular society, Christian communities need, more than ever, to adhere to and maintain a vital contact with Jesus, the Christ. Relationship - not regulations. Preachers let you down when they only preach ethics - a moral code; that was the sort of preaching I was brought up with - being told week after week how sinful I was. What we need to be told is how much we are loved.

Following Jesus - believing in him - means having eternal life, here and now. Not pie in the sky when you die - but life in all its God given abundance now, creating a community of people who, by forgiving each other our failings, can offer one another life, as St Paul puts it 'with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. When we give life, as Jesus gives life, in all its forms and expressions, we will become imitators of God, in whose image we are made. St Paul challenges the Ephesian Christians - and us - to come 'to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ'. Jesus has given us the rules by which we should live - there are only two - Love God; Love one

another. Now that is simple enough, isn't it? It is as simple, and as difficult, as that.

In the Exodus wilderness, the people saw the manna and asked 'what is it' - and the only answer they could conceive was that this was from God. The manna not only fed them, it demonstrated that God would sustain them on their journey. Now Jesus offers himself as bread for our journey - 'I am the bread of life' - to satisfy our deepest needs.