



18TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It takes something like the current recession to make people realise what really matters. Higher prices make people economise, and one of the first areas of life to be affected is how much we are willing to spend on food. We all need food to stay alive, and when times are hard and money is short, we have to cut out the inessentials and luxuries, and concentrate on what we need, as opposed to what we want. Food is the staple of life, without which we cannot live, and it is when money is short that it puts that fact in sharp focus.

The people of Israel were in a similar situation in the wilderness: their food had run out, they were hungry and were despairing of where their next meal was going to come from: hunger, and the need for food, puts our priorities in order. It was in response to the need for feeding his people physically that God provided manna. Before they could learn to obey his commandments and keep his covenant, they had to be physically satisfied. Here we see God's providence at work, in providing not just for the spiritual needs of his people, but also the physical ones. But the food with which God fed his people was temporary: it was meant for one time only, and, indeed, men did 'eat the bread of angels' which the Lord had provided from heaven. However, the manna in the wilderness was given for a specific time and circumstance: it was not intended that it should endure.

It is in this context that we must understand this morning's Gospel reading. Last week, we heard the first part of Jesus' teaching on the Bread of Life, which is found only in S. John's Gospel, and next week, we shall hear the final instalment. But, we must understand Jesus' teaching on the Bread of Life in the context of the worship of Israel, and the provision of manna in the wilderness.

The setting for Jesus' teaching on the Bread of Life is in Jerusalem at the time of the celebration of Passover: this is why there were so many people in the city, so that Jesus could perform his miracle of feeding the five thousand. The Jewish people had gathered, as the Law of Moses instructed them, to worship God and to remember the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, and how God had saved them from their oppressors and brought them into the Promised Land. However, on their way to the Promised Land, they wandered for forty years in the wilderness, and were fed with bread from heaven. It was the miracle of the provision of abundant manna in the wilderness that Jesus repeated in the feeding of the five thousand, demonstrating that he was God, and had the power to provide for the physical needs of the people, as well as the spiritual. The people were certainly impressed by his miracle, and this is why Jesus chides them for following him: 'You are not looking for me because you have seen the signs but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat'. The people were attracted by the miracle, but failed to make the connection: that Jesus was one and the same

God who had provided their ancestors with an abundance of bread in their years in the wilderness. It was this abundant provision that they were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate, and here, in the midst of them, comes Jesus offering them more than manna: he offers them the true bread that comes down from heaven, his very self.

Once again, the people fail to make the connection: they want Jesus to give them yet another sign, even after the miracle he has just performed, and they site the feeding with manna in the desert. But Jesus corrects them: they believe that it was Moses who gave them the manna, but Jesus says that it was the Father who not only gave the bread, but who continues to give it. Jesus then makes an audacious claim: he says that he is the bread of which he is speaking. Not only does he equate himself with God by saying 'I am', but he claims to be the bread itself. The Father, who provided for the physical needs of their fathers, now provides for both their physical and spiritual need through his Son, who he has sent into the world. Jesus, the Bread of Life, is the one who is able to provide food that will last forever, so that those who eat of him will never die.

Jesus' claim to be the Bread of Life was an astonishing one at the time: he had come to his own people and was claiming that he was not only greater than Moses and the manna that their forefathers had eaten, but that he was himself the living Bread which had been sent by God, so that those who eat of him should never go hungry, and be given eternal life. It's no wonder the Jewish leaders found Jesus' message so hard to accept: he had completely overturned their accepted understanding of the meaning of the Passover and the miracle of the manna in the desert.

As Christians, we understand Jesus as the true Passover: at Easter we celebrate the completion of the Law and the Prophets in Christ's victory over sin and death, and we confidently proclaim him the Paschal Lamb, who was foreshadowed by the lambs sacrificed at the Passover. And so, too, we understand Jesus as the Bread of Life, and we eat, in the Mass, of the Bread which gives life to our souls, so that, as Jesus promised, those who eat of his flesh and drink of his blood will live forever. Jesus is the completion of all that had gone before: he not only completes, but he gives meaning to the prophecies and sacrifices of the Old Testament. All that had gone before in Jewish history found its true meaning in Jesus. This is what he is trying to get the people to understand in his teaching on the Bread of Life. The people are looking for physical food, but what he teaches them they need is spiritual food, that he is able to give them, only if they are willing to accept him for who he is, and to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

Jesus is teaching us the same lesson today: we come to him, just as those people in Jerusalem did, asking him to 'Give us that bread always'. Each of us has a longing in our hearts and souls that only Jesus can satisfy. Of course, we need food to keep our bodies physically strong and healthy, just as the Israelites did in the wilderness. But Jesus calls us not to work only for food that does not endure, but to work for food that endures to eternal life, the food that he is offering us: the food of himself. Whether we have much food or little, a great deal of money or none; whether our lives are comfortable or difficult, whether we have many possessions or few, we all have one thing in common: each one of us needs Jesus to satisfy our inmost desires and longings, for it is he alone, and not the vanities and trappings of this world, that can bring us everlasting life.

As you come to the altar today, give thanks to God for all the blessings that you receive from him in this life: thank him for your families and friends, your food and homes. But come, too, acknowledging that he alone is the source of all that you have and are, and that it is only he who can feed you with his Son's Body and Blood, and bring you to eternal life. All that we have, all that we make of our lives, all the good works that we do cannot bring us eternal life. Only God can do that, through his Son, whose Body and Blood we eat and drink as he commanded us to do. When you have received Holy Communion, go back to your seat and spend a few moments thanking God that you have shared in a miracle: that you have been fed with the Bread of Life, which gives you the assurance of eternal life; thank God that you are loved with an inexpressible love, and that your sins are forgiven and laid at the foot of the Cross; and rejoice that Christ's words are true: 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst.'

Amen.