

The 18th Sunday of Year B; God ‘feeds’ us; what do we do in return?

1st Reading: Exodus 16:2-4+12-15: The manna in the desert;

2nd Reading: Ephesians 4:17+20-24: Proper Christian behaviour;

Gospel: John 6:24-35: The implications of the feeding of the 5,000.

The Israelites, during their 40 years in the desert, were a grumpy lot. The 1st reading, where they complained about losing the amenities available to them in Egypt, reminds me of school “outward bound” trips, on which I used to go in the 1970’s & 1980’s. Some students, although glad to be with their pals & teachers - and away from parents for a week - complained about the shortage of showers, loos and space in the hostel. (Those were the main problems then, long before child protection and health & safety became the major issues.) “It’s not like home,” they would say. Exactly. Afterwards, many were glad to get back to home comforts – despite the presence of nosy parents!

So, we return to the Israelites in the wilderness. To be frank with you, it is anyone’s guess, how much of the story is ‘history’ and how much folk-lore. Common-sense should have told them that a huge group of people crossing the desert would need enormous provisions of food, water and equipment. How much they started out with is hard to know, but they were obviously hungry and thirsty very quickly. The arrival of flocks of quails (small migratory partridges) into their camp was not in itself miraculous – though very convenient - but the manna certainly was. Scholars think the origin of manna was a normal thing – an edible resin given off by desert shrubs, which helped to sustain them on their journey. It is thought that, as time went on, the manna was remembered as possessing bread-like properties, having been given miraculously by God. This explains why it was later called “Bread from heaven”, and it is this sense that both the Jews and Jesus have in mind in this Sunday’s gospel passage.

In the gospel, after the 5,000 had been fed, many of the people return over the water to Capernaum, and meet Jesus there. Then begins one of those longish dialogues that feature in St John’s Gospel; this one starts off about Jesus’ authority. He says that people should not look for him just to be fed again, but rather to understand what this “sign” means – that God is working in him, to offer them spiritual happiness. This would be *the “food that endures to eternal life”* – in other words, not material to fill the stomach, but faith.

At this point, they challenge Jesus: God had shown his power to be in Moses when he used him to be the means by which their forefathers received

the manna in the desert: “*God gave them Bread from Heaven to eat*”. What can Jesus now do to match that, and prove that God is with him? Jesus answers this with a reply that is, quite honestly, hard to get one’s head round. He says that it was not Moses who gave them the “Bread from Heaven”, but his Father who GIVES (*present tense*) the “true bread” that offers life to the world. The people, thinking he still means bread in the food sense, ask for a supply of this wonder-bread! His reply: “*I am the Bread of Life: he who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst*”.

Although we often use this phrase to refer to Jesus’ presence in Holy Communion, this is not exactly what he means here. He is claiming divine authority: “1250 years ago, God gave special ‘bread’ (‘manna’) through Moses to keep people’s bodies alive in the desert; now, God is giving you another type of “bread” to keep your souls alive for ever – me.” He is effectively saying that his coming into the world is a greater event than even Moses’ leadership, the Exodus from Egypt and the survival in the desert. This would certainly set the cat among the pigeons! We shall see the ensuing argument next week.

What do we make of this? Our Lord’s Jewish hearers would have often used this weekend’s responsorial psalm 77 (78 in non-RC Bibles), where we read: “*Mere men ate the bread of angels; he sent them abundance of food. He brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won.*” (The last bit means Mount Zion, the centre of the Jerusalem Temple.) The danger with great tradition like this is that it can descend into mere nostalgia, and an obsession with the past. (We see this on some TV channels – endless World War II documentaries, with the same bits of film repeated.) Unfortunately, this can also happen with any religion. The result: faith stops being a personal commitment to a living divine being – Jesus Christ; instead, it becomes a cultural thing, where the main aim can be to get “perfect” music & the “right” words. When this happens, what we believe and how we behave (basic elements in all religion) can become less important.

This weekend, I think Jesus’ meaning is that God’s religion had to move on from Moses, the Exodus and the Manna; this shocked his Jewish hearers. Sometimes, things shock us; they ensure that we do not take our faith for granted, but are never a pleasant experience. However, in recent years, our Church (along with some others) has had more than its fair share of shocks. The only solution to is get back to what really matters – Jesus Christ and his presence in our communities. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

