

# the Sunday Readings



Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it wasn't Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it's my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6: 32 - 33)

## 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

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## *the Bread of Life*<sup>1</sup>

### introduction

We gather in the midst of a society where the culture of death, more often than not, seems to hold sway. Over and against this culture, is the Israelite tradition of hope; that there will be a decisive and radical re-ordering of social power and goods in life-giving ways. John's sixth chapter begins with the account of the multiplication of the loaves. The gospel probes the depth of the meaning of this gesture of Jesus, as a sign which points to more universal realities. Jesus' action expresses the gratuitous and life-giving love of God.

**first reading: Exodus 16 : 2 – 4, 12 – 15**<sup>2</sup>

[ ]

*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.(2) The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."(3) Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.(4)*

The story of the Lord's feeding the Israelites in the wilderness shows the Lord is zealous for the well-being of people. A compassionate God continues to intervene in Israelite life. The same Lord, who promised to be with Moses and the people at the burning bush;<sup>3</sup> who demonstrated that powerful presence at Passover;<sup>4</sup> and at the crossing of the Sea,<sup>5</sup> now promises Moses to send bread for them, "from heaven" (v.4a).<sup>6</sup>

*The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"(12) In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.(13) When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.(14) When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.(15)*

1 Cover Image: The feeding of the crowd with five loaves and two fish with the assistance of apostles Andrew and Philip. Icon written by Anna Poloz.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 Ex.3

4 Ex.12:1-14

5 Ex.14:19-31

6 [v.4] *Test their faith:* - by providing only a portion sufficient for one day (cf Dt.8:3,16; Mt.6:11).

The grumbings of the community (vv.2-3) cause the Lord to act, precisely to demonstrate that their complaints are an example of their foolishness (vv.7-9,11). The feeding becomes a sort of rebuke for their short-sightedness.<sup>7</sup> There seems to have been two types of food; *quail* in the evening and *manna* in the morning (vv. 8, & 12-13).<sup>8</sup> The passage ends with a description of the arrival of the first foods, quail (vv.13-14).

To the puzzled people's question, "*What is it?*" Moses replies, "*It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat*" (v.15). They are a people who have been shaped by the holy God's mighty action in the past as they journeyed to freedom from slave work in Egypt. Although they quickly forgot the earlier events, they still remain the Lord's own people. In their hungry wanderings in the wilderness of Sinai, they have complained to Moses and Aaron, by comparing the regular and meaty meals they supposedly enjoyed in Egypt, with the hunger they now experience in the desert. Moses and Aaron explain the Lord's promise to provide food. The feeding will be a reminder of their Exodus (vv.2-4).

They are a people shaped by their escape from Egypt. They have already experienced the holy God's mighty acts that made them able to set out on their journey towards freedom. Although they quickly forgot this great event that made them a people – they still remained God's own people. They continue to be defined by and are at the disposal of, the Lord, who is unco-opted and unrestricted by the empire of Pharaoh, or any other immobilising satisfaction.

**response: Psalm 78 : 3 – 4, 23 – 25, 54**

[ God's goodness to Israel ]

*The things that we have heard and known,  
that our ancestors have told us.(3)  
We will not hide them from their children;  
we will tell to the coming generation  
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and His might,  
and the wonders that He has done.(4) . . .  
Yet He commanded the skies above,  
and opened the doors of heaven;(23)  
He rained down on them manna to eat,  
and gave them the grain of heaven.(24)  
Mortals ate of the bread of angels;  
he sent them food in abundance.(25) . . .  
And He brought them to His holy hill,  
to the mountain that His right hand had won.(54)*

7 [v.4] *a test their faith* – by providing only a portion sufficient for one day (cf. Dt.8:3,16; Mt.6:11).

8 The quail could be a reminder of the Lord's intervention in the recent past (v.6) and Moses (with the people?) hears the words of the Lord giving instruction for the eating of the divine food and drawing attention to the significance of these special meals - "*Then you shall know, that I am the Lord your God*"(v.12).

The psalmist announces the community's responsibility to voice the glorious deeds of the Lord. Lessons are drawn from the past. God worked wonders in the wilderness (vv.23-25) when the people's rebelliousness was answered by new divine saving deeds (v.54). The learning is that the holy God often grants extravagant requests, but the beneficiaries can still perish in the midst of their satisfaction, if the Lord's generosity does not lead them from their self-serving ways.

The speaker comments on the duty to nurture the young (v.4). Such speech aims to shape a people who can take responsibility for the future of the world. That future, in the long-term, won't be brought about by technical competence. Although technical competence is important, the future will be wrought by those who have the capacity, resources, inclination, and courage to imagine the world differently.

Evangelising the young concerns not only, the well-being of the family, or the survival of the community. It concerns the future of the whole world and depends on respect for the virtues of reliability and trust. To evangelise the young is to enter into a conversation with them; to call and legitimate the next generation, who will care for the world well beyond the dominant and seductive technologies and powerful ideologies, that happen to be presently ruling so powerfully.<sup>9</sup>

**second reading: Ephesians 4 : 17, 20 – 24**<sup>10</sup>

[ the old life and the new ]

*Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds.(17) . . . That is not the way you learned Christ!(20) For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus.(21) You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts,(22) and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,(23) and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.(24)*

According to the writer, belief in reconciliation through Christ, demands not only acceptance in mind and heart, but also actions that are appropriate to such faith (vv.17-19). *Non-Israelites (gentiles)* who would not accept Christ are a

<sup>9</sup> *Psalm 78* – is a recital of history to show that past generations did not respond to God's gracious deeds and were punished by God making the gift into a punishment. Will Israel now fail to appreciate God's new act – the choosing of Zion and of David? The introduction invites Israel to learn the lessons hidden in its traditions (vv.1-4,5-7,8-11); each section ends with the mention of God's acts. There are two distinct narratives: the wilderness events (vv.12-39) and the movement from Egypt to Canaan (vv.40-72). The structure of both is parallel: gracious act (vv.12-16,40-55), rebellion (vv.17-20,56-58), divine punishment (vv.21-31,59-64), God's readiness to forgive and begin anew (vv.32-39,65-72). The psalm may reflect the reunification program of either King Hezekiah (late eighth century) or King Josiah (late seventh century) in that the Northern Kingdom (Ephraim, Joseph) is especially invited to accept Zion and the Davidic king.

<sup>10</sup> In *Eph. 4:17-24*, Paul begins to indicate how the new life in Christ contrasts with the gentiles' old way of existence. Literally, *the old self* (*Eph. 4:22*) and *the new self* (*Eph. 4:24*) are 'the old man' and 'the new man' (*anthropos = person*), as at *Eph. 2:15*.

negative example of faith. The writer asks *gentile Christians* to remember how things were with them before they answered the call of faith. At that time, their dulled sense of rightness, had led them to a *"lack of self-control and uncleanness"*. Bad faith, or having no faith at all, leads to bad actions.

In contrast, is the example of Christ (vv.20-24). His death and resurrection is crucially important as an example of faith for disciples. Jesus' act of generous self-giving made possible reconciliation with God, with one another and with our own selves. Those who have learned the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, won't go on *"living the empty-headed life of the gentiles"* (v.17). Their, *"donning the clothing of faith"* is a reminder to gentile Christians of their baptism assent of faith (vv.22-24). That assent brought Christian disciples into a new and special relationship with God in Christ. It marked the end of their former way of life, which was, *'corrupted by illusory desires'* (v.22). They began a new life, *'in uprightness and holiness'* (v.24). Baptismal faith requires appropriate actions. Christian disciples, because of their faith in God, Christ, and the holy Spirit, can no longer live as gentiles do. Jesus isn't simply a model to be slavishly copied, but rather a living person whose grace helps disciples along the way.

**gospel reading: John 6 : 24 - 35**

[ the Bread from heaven ]

*So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.(24) When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"(25) Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.(26) Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."(27)*

The bread that cannot last is bread we seek selfishly. The bread that gives life is the bread we seek unselfishly; that is, as a community. That bread produces lasting life because it produces the reigning of God.<sup>11</sup> The true food Jesus was bringing was union among people in the actions of sharing. It wasn't the business of multiplying loaves and fish. The people hadn't understood the actions of sharing the food that they had.

Jesus is saying to the people that the food that they have had, hasn't solved any of their problems. The true meaning of the feeding of the crowd is about transforming the world. It is about replacing the system of injustice with a system of giving. That's the bread he has brought – his Word. It's because Jesus is the message of love that God has sent us. He can say that God's seal is on him as on a letter. Jesus identifies himself with the life-giving power of God – both by the sign of feeding the crowd and by his words that followed the feeding: *"I am the*

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11 [v.27] *'the food that endures for eternal life'* cf. Jn.4:14, on water, *'springing up to eternal life'*.

*bread of life.*" Such signs are the key to John's account of the life and work of Jesus. It was soon after the feeding of the large crowd on the opposite shore of the lake that some sought him out:

*Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"(28) Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom He has sent."(29)*

The people ask Jesus what they should do to carry out God's plan. He doesn't answer their question. Instead he tells them that God's plan is that they believe God sent him; that he has been sent as a messiah; as a liberator! That is the same as believing in liberation. Jesus suggests a new way of doing the truth: *believe in his WORD* – that is – believe in his practise of love, in sharing what one has. His listeners remembered the first liberation from Egyptian slavery. They tell him that Moses showed signs of being a liberator sent by God when he fed the people with, '*bread from heaven.*' They ask Jesus what signs he can show:

*So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?(30) Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"(31) Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.(32) For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."(33)*

The scriptures say, as the people have quoted to Jesus, that the manna was, '*a loaf from heaven.*'<sup>12</sup> And Jesus tells them that it's not a true loaf from heaven.<sup>13</sup> Jesus says that there isn't any bread like that come down from heaven. The only bread that comes from heaven is the word of love, which he is transmitting by his actions. That bread will give people new life.

*They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."(34) Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.(35)*

Unlike Moses, Jesus not merely gives the people a gift – he comes for sociability; for co-operation. In other words, the greatest hunger and thirst of people is the hunger and thirst for love. That is the thirst that Jesus says he has come to quench. Jesus provides true food from heaven – he is God's WORD (v.32). He comes to give love to those who believe in him. Believing him means giving up self-interest. It means seeking communion by matching our practice with his. Jesus chose common meals to represent the union of people that nourish our human hunger and thirst for love. Believing and consuming his food and drink is

12 [v.31] '*Bread from heaven*' – cf. Ex.16:4,15,32-34 & Ps.78:24 – *the manna*, thought to have been hidden by Jeremiah (2 M.2:5-8), was expected to reappear miraculously at Passover, in the last days.

13 It has now been shown, that *manna* was really a sweet, white syrup that drips from the Tamarind tree.

about changing the world – its about replacing the system of injustice with a system of love.

for sharing:<sup>14</sup>

- *The provision of food in the wilderness. Comment on Exodus 16 : 2 – 4, 12 – 15*
- *The Christian is a person who has been created holy and just after the image of God. Comment on Ephesians 4 : 17, 20 – 24*
- *'I am the Bread of Life'. These signs and words are key to John's account of the meaning of the life and work of Jesus. Comment on John 6 : 24 – 35*

prayer:<sup>15</sup>

*Lord,  
Giver of lasting Life,  
satisfy our hunger  
through Christ, the bread of life,  
and quench our thirst  
with Your gift of belief,  
that we may no longer work  
for food that perishes,  
but believe in the One  
whom You have sent.  
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

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14 Lectio Divina: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

15 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

**review:**<sup>16</sup>

*We modern disciples of Jesus live in the midst of a society where the powers of death, more often than not, hold sway. We are strongly tempted to reject, discredit, or cover up any pro-life qualities that would make us noticed, different, or vulnerable in our dominant society. When Jesus faced society's rejection of his message; when the costs of following through God's power for life-giving demanded sacrifice, he showed the integrity of his convictions. Would-be disciples like us, act contrary to Jesus' integrity by over-conforming to our dominant society; or we desire our society's success or recognition, at the expense of the reigning of God.*

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<sup>16</sup> The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.