

Sunday between 31st July and 6th August [18]

John 6:24-35

Bread, it seems, is a popular medium for God to use in performing miracles. Last week we were shown an example where God used ordinary bread to do miraculous works. Today's gospel reading is concerned with heavenly bread, both physically and spiritually. In the reading the people with Jesus reminded him of the story of God sending manna from heaven, heavenly bread. Here's a refresher for us, the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for what turned out to be 40 years upon their escape from Egypt, led by Moses. They were tired, disheartened and infinitely impatient, with Moses and especially with God. In a fit of petulance, they decided they had been better off as slaves in Egypt because at least there they had food.

They had prayed and God had answered their prayers, yet this was not good enough. It seems the Hebrews wanted the fairy-tale prayer response of a happily ever after from God, they were looking for a one way answer to the covenant that God had made with their ancestors. They wanted something from God but gave nothing in return, in fact their response was hostility towards God and his chosen representatives.

God, however, heard this prayer too and responded, not with an end to the wandering which is perhaps what was being prayed for, but rather with the provision of food in the form of a bread flour the like of which no one had ever seen before. It is difficult to envisage this manna, because it's not something with which we are familiar, otherwise the scripture would say, God sent down grain and each morning the people collected it. No this was something else, something described as being like hoar frost, fine flakes blanketing the ground. If it were hoar frost it would be impossible to collect it, it would melt as soon as you touched it, but this is a description of appearance only. So, something fine, like frost which could be used like flour to make a dough and create bread (unleavened we imagine as there is no word of yeast).

What a wonderful example of answer to prayer, and of God's creative and complete view of our circumstances which we never have as we live in the midst of it. And yet what is the response? More grumbling! It's all very well having this bread everyday but there's no meat, the people complain. Even after being witnesses to the miracle of the manna, the people are unsatisfied, they want always to have more from God, instead of glorifying him in praise and worship they grumble about him and the shortcomings they perceive in their lives. When we look on this today we are cross with the Hebrews, we feel that they are disrespectful towards God.

But had anything improved by Jesus' time? Well not really. He fed 5000 people with a tiny amount of bread and a little bit of fish and that got the attention of many who followed him by boat across the sea of Galilee. Jesus knew what they wanted, they wanted more food, more physical gifts, they saw the miracle and wanted to see it again. But Jesus encourages them to look beyond the physical and to work towards the eternal and spiritual, using the metaphor of bread to describe seeking that which

is necessary for life with God rather than the bread which is necessary for life in the mortal body.

To begin with the people seem to understand and they say, what must we do to do the work of God? And Jesus tells them simply to believe in the one whom God has sent. Nothing more, just believe in Jesus. But what do the people do? They ask for proof, show us a miracle then so that we may believe they say. What! They've just witnessed the feeding of the 5000 but they need something more? They ask for a demonstration of power like that of Moses when the manna from heaven arrived in the desert, but Jesus sees that nothing has changed. People are searching for physical proofs and not opening their hearts to hear God's spiritual call. He teaches that there will be no proofs beyond what they have already seen, that's not how Jesus recruits with wonders that people later forget or explain away, he calls people into relationship with him personally and in that way he himself is the bread of life.

Jesus has nothing more to prove to these people. He sees that they are lost and in need of guidance, but he cannot provide direction for them by performing miracle after miracle, he can't just feed their bodies, they must open their hearts to be fed by his teaching, they must accept the gift of God's grace and live spiritually with that love of God within them. They must believe in Jesus and rely on him rather than trying to maintain control over their situations where any control is mostly an illusion anyway.

So now that Jesus has been amongst us and we are his followers all this time later with the benefit of the teachings and experiences of so many saints and holy people are we any better at this? How often do we find ourselves in a place of need and try to meet that need ourselves without letting God in? How often do we finally get to a place where we are desperate and only then call out to the Lord in prayer? How often do we feel our prayers are unanswered because things haven't gone the way we imagined they ought to? All of these scenarios mirror what humanity has always done. We set ourselves up as masters of our own destiny in what we see as a chaotic world which is often difficult to navigate. And yet we have, by grace, been brought into relationship with God and God has a view of our world that is not chaotic and impossible to predict. God sees yesterday, today and tomorrow, God is beyond time and so is in fact the only one who can exercise any type of influence or control. Why are we not better at letting God in first? Why are we not making every prayer an offering of Your will be done?

The Hebrew people, in order to truly understand the covenant relationship they had with God, needed to live dependently upon God. They complained and rebelled because dependency is not a comfortable place for humanity, we don't like it. When we get lost, however, like the people following Jesus in the gospel reading we find something to cling to, it's not always the best thing for us because it is often the first thing we find that helps in times of desperation. For us, dependence should be on God, It is God's gift to us and the perfect response to any gift is joyful acceptance or else we risk offending the gift giver. But also, God's offering is truly what is best for us. God has nothing to prove, nothing to gain, this gift is entirely for us. Let us rely on Jesus alone so that we may never be hungry, thirsty, lost or alone again.