

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Exodus 16. 2-4, 9-15

Ephesians 4. 1-16

John 6. 24-35

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Jesus has just fed the crowd of five thousand and has performed another miracle by walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee during very stormy weather. Ever since that miraculous meal was over, the crowds have been looking for our Lord; and at last, they find him on the other side of the lake, in Capernaum. They ask, rather naively, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus realises that they are still thinking of filling their stomachs, and tells them, ‘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.’

Traditionally, Jews believed that outside of the physical food that sustains human life, true life was to be obtained by keeping the Law, or the commandments of God.¹ And here is our Lord, pointing to an alternative nourishment as the source of eternal life: nourishment that will be the future gift of the Son of Man.

The crowd attempts to pass over the promise that Christ has just given them, and so they ask him instead, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Obviously as Jews, they were expecting to be told, ‘Do what’s prescribed in the Law, and you will have access to the Father’. But no. Our Lord says that access to God is only through the Son who makes God known. The only way to do the work of God, then, is to believe in the one whom God has sent.

¹ Cf. Ex 15. 26.

The people in the crowd seem to understand that they are supposed to believe in Christ, the one who has been sent by the Father. This leads them to ask, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe in you?’ They want a sign that is even greater than the one that Moses gave the Israelites in the desert, when bread (or manna) was provided from heaven.²

At the time of Jesus, a popular Jewish expectation was that when the Messiah came, he would again send manna from heaven. And as they stood in front of our Lord, the members of the crowd probably thought that in the end, he had done little compared to Moses. Christ had fed five thousand people; but Moses had fed a whole nation. Our Lord had performed a miracle once; but Moses had done it for forty years. When Christ fed the five thousand, he gave ordinary bread; but in the desert, Moses gave ‘bread from heaven’.

Our Lord has to correct the people in the crowd, and tell them that the manna in the desert did not come from Moses, but from God; and that the Father *still gives* (the present tense is important) true bread from heaven. But this true bread is no longer manna; it is ‘the bread of God...which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’ (6. 33). However wonderful the former gift of God was, the true bread from heaven is the gift that the Father is now giving. It comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.³ The use of the word ‘true’ in our text sets this bread over all other breads, even the bread given to the Jews’ ancestors through Moses.

Again, the people in the crowd misunderstand. They say, ‘Sir, give us this bread always’, thinking that our Lord will give them manna, just as Moses had done so many years ago. Jesus responds by identifying himself with the once-and-for-all gift

² This never-failing nourishment from God was identified, in both the Jewish and the midrashic traditions, with the gift of the Law. The people attempt to force Jesus into their Mosaic model: Moses, the manna and the Torah give life to Israel. What sign can Jesus give to surpass the sign of the gift of bread from heaven in the desert, and all that this has come to mean: the life-giving presence of the Torah to God’s people?

³ As compared to the Torah, that only gave life to the Jews.

of the bread. He says, ‘*I am* the bread of life’ (6. 35).⁴ In saying ‘I am’, our Lord is stating not only who he is (the very Son of God),⁵ but what he does. He nourishes with a bread that produces life. The manna that was given by God to the Israelites in the desert was but a foretaste of the bread of life given by Jesus.⁶ And whoever comes to him will never be hungry; and whoever believes in him will never thirst.

I’m sure that all of us know of people who are physically hungry. In spite of the abundant wealth in our world, there are still people who are in material need and who do not have enough to eat.

But I imagine that many of us also know other people who are not at all hungry and who seem to lack nothing. They fill their lives with activities and ‘things’. And yet no matter how much they get, they are still not satisfied. There is something in us that ‘things’ cannot fill, no matter what we buy, no matter how we fill up our days. As St Augustine once reminded us, God made us *for himself*; and nothing else will really fill the space he created within us *for himself*. In each of us, there is a space for the eternal; and nothing less than the eternal God can fill it.

Today, you and I are invited to eat the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. We are invited to be guests at a heavenly banquet, in which all heaven joins us; we are invited to share in the body and blood of Christ. As Jesus will say himself later on in the sixth chapter of St John’s gospel, ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink’ (6. 54, 55).

⁴ The first of the ‘I am’ sayings (self-descriptions of Jesus, given in 8.12; 9.5; 10. 7, 9; 10. 11, 14; 11.25; 14. 6; 15. 1, 5).

⁵ Cf. Ex 3. 14, 15.

⁶ As the word of God (cf. Is 55. 10-11) and the Law of God were understood as a gift of God come down from heaven (cf. Ex 19. 11, 20), Jesus presents himself as the perfection of the former gift of the Law. And as the Law was to lead a chosen people to belong forever to YHWH, so it is with Jesus. In the new situation, where the Law has been replaced by Jesus and the new people of God includes whomsoever the Father gives him, the will of the Father is that not one of these be lost, either now or hereafter.

This morning, you and I are invited to eat the food that God gives; and on a grander scale, we are invited to receive for ourselves all that our Lord is and has for us, not only today but for ever.

† Amen.