

ORDINARY SUNDAY 18 – AUGUST 2nd
Exodus 16:2-15; John 6:24-35

Exodus 16:2-15

This story comes immediately after the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt. There, as Miriam's song reminds us, *Let us sing to the Lord, for he has covered himself in glory!* God has shown his power and his might. He has shown the strength of his arm. He has shown the great love he has for his people and he has already declared that he will lead them, through Moses, to a new life in the land he will give to them in Canaan. There have been no shortages of signs and wonders worked by Yahweh to bring all of this about. Yet here they are, having just seen God's power in their escape through the Red Sea, whinging and complaining about their shortage of food and water. Three days into their journey to freedom and they want to give up and go home! They want freedom. They want salvation. They want a new life – but apparently not if it is going to demand too much hardship of them.

The mindset of these people is beautifully set out in the dialogue. They complain that back in Egypt they could sit around the flesh pots and eat their fill. Here in the desert what do they have? We are told that *the whole company of Israel began complaining against Moses and Aaron.* I am sure they must have asked themselves why they would want to persevere with their vocations. Surely this is a people who really do not want freedom. What they want is comfort and perhaps they should abandon their callings and go on to Canaan on their own. Let the people find new leaders to take them back to their former ways of living in the hope that they will not eventually disappear altogether into the Egyptian culture.

But Moses was a man of faith. Yes he had his weaknesses but his love for God was all consuming and his determination to walk in God's ways was what kept him going, despite the stubborn ways of the people he was called to serve. What did he do when the complaints became too much? He turned to God. That is the first and key message of today. The starting point for difficulties and troubles in our journeys of faith must always be God. After all, it was God who called us and it is God who will sustain us.

And what a wonderful relationship Moses had with God. As we read this story it is easy to conjure up a mental image of two blokes sitting under a tree having a yarn. *Moses says to God...* and *Yahweh says to Moses.....* That is the kind of relationship to which we are all called and as we know from the story of the Exodus, God listens to those who live their lives in his service.

Moses also makes a strong point when he makes it clear to the people as they whinge about the hardships facing them. He says that they are not complaining against Moses and Aaron for leading them out into the desert. They are complaining against the God who called Moses and Aaron and set them in place over the community. They need to believe that it is God who is in control and not Moses. They need to see Moses as God's tool and keep their eyes firmly fixed on the God who is leading them. That too is an important point. God can use anyone he pleases to carry out his will, even someone as weak and fragile as Moses.

In a classical piece of biblical understatement the whinges of the people are answered. There are not great signs and wonders, no trumpets blaring and angels flapping around in the heavens. We are told *that night quails flew in and covered the camp. The next morning there was a layer of dew on the ground* that was manna, bread given to them by God. It is as simple as that. The people needed God and God responded to their needs. God had called them into the journey, into the wilderness to test them. Having called them. He fed them.

Having promised them a new home in Canaan he helped them along the way to reach that new beginning. Despite their faithlessness, God remained faithful to his promises.

The sin of the Hebrews is an all too human a failing. We want life in the Kingdom but at times the cost of discipleship can be too much. As a Church we are called to renew our lives in Christ. We have to live confident that each and every day, in each and every moment, in each and every decision and relationship, God will feed us and guide us – if we allow him to take over. Things only go wrong when we begin to put ourselves first. If we think that we can feed ourselves, then we are doomed. If we think we can fight our own battles then we are lost. If we are not willing to subject ourselves to God's plans, then we will be lost in our wildernesses forever.

John 6:24-35

Our text today is one of the most written about texts in the whole of John's Gospel. The reason for this is that it contains important aspects of John's theology of the Eucharist and also because it more than likely arose out of the eucharistic celebrations that took place in John's Church. There are three key sections in today's reading and one more question that will appear in next Sunday's Gospel. The whole section is very much caught up in reflections around the statement: *He gave them bread from heaven to eat (6:31)*.

The first question is: *Rabbi, when did you come here?* From any angle, this is an odd question and its strangeness is recognised by Jesus. While earlier they wanted to make him their king (6:15) now they are accused of seeking Jesus simply because he has filled their bellies with bread. They are not even moved by the power of his miracles. All they want is their physical hunger taken away. This question enables Jesus to tell them that they should not be seeking a bread that will perish, that might feed them for a short while but gives a satisfaction that will not endure. What they should be doing is seeking a food that endures. We know from chapter 4 that this enduring food is *to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*.

Enduring food can only be given to them by the Son of Man. It is a unique gift and it is only going to be available in Him and the crowd is urged to work for that food. Why is this true? It is because God himself has *set his seal on Jesus*. Whatever of the role of the Law in the Old Testament. In this new covenant, doing God's work is caught up in living life in and around the Son of Man.

This is why the crowd now ask Jesus: *What must we do if we are to carry out God's work?* They would have been wondering what particular parts of the Law must they obey as a priority. Or, perhaps wonder if they have to wander off into the desert to live in isolated communities like the Essenes and seek to fulfil every one of the teachings of the Torah. But Jesus answer is as simple as it is demanding: *This is obeying the will of God, this is doing God's work – you must believe in the one he sent*. Now believe here is not simply a head notion. When John says "believe" he means live Jesus like lives. We are called to live lives that are nourished and fed by Jesus, that are empowered and enlightened by the Son of Man. We have to give up lives that are lived in pursuit of "bread" that might make us feel good and satisfy some of our human needs but which will not endure and not feed us for the journey to our eternal home in heaven.

The next significant question is *what sign do you do that we may see it and believe in you?* This is a key question because they now understand that Jesus means that he is the one sent by God. If that is true, then the people want a sign to reassure them. In his answer Jesus speaks to them in a language that will shock them. The people themselves provide him with the right biblical text by saying that their fathers ate manna in the desert – *He gave them bread from heaven to eat*.

The people were nourished on their journey from slavery to new life in Canaan by the never ending food of heaven. In Jewish tradition this *bread from heaven* was understood not just as the manna but as the Law given by God on Mt Sinai. This Torah was a food that would lead them to life and indeed was seen as being a living and life giving gift.

At this stage we need to remember that this chapter is lived out as the feast of the Passover drew near and so the Passover provides something of the theological background to what John is saying. Jesus affirms that the Passover celebrates something significant in their history but that it was not Moses who fed their fathers. It was God who fed them and while there can be no doubting of the greatness of that act, there is a greater feeding on offer here today. Jesus is God's gift of life giving bread for the whole world. He is the "true" bread who feeds not just Israel but all who come to him, all the peoples of the earth. The same God who fed Israel is now offering to feed all who believe in his Son.

Finally there is the request of the people: *Sir, give us this bread always!* Once more they misunderstand what Jesus is saying. They want bread over and over again. But what Jesus is offering is a "once-for-all" gift of life. He is the bread of life. In saying *I am the Bread of Life* he is not saying who he is but what he does. He is food for life. He is to be taken up, consumed and made one with the person eating. Anyone who comes to him will be nourished. He is not like the Law, a food for the people of Israel. He is food for all who believe in him, those who come to him and live their lives in him.

Then Jesus brings us all back to the true challenge of discipleship. The people have seen the signs he has worked but interpret them only in terms of their own comforts and human needs. They have seen but do not believe. If they believed they would repent, they would change the way they lived and they would follow him. That is the real test of belief: whether or not someone is prepared to change their lives for the sake of being united with the Son of Man.

Conclusion:

These readings speak to us eloquently, challenging us to evaluate those things for which we are truly hungry. Do we hunger for the passing things of this life or are we content to be fed by God with the true Bread of Heaven? Will we allow God to feed us in Jesus or do we have our own way of feeding ourselves and turn to God only for dessert?

Jesus himself says it all: *I am the bread of life and no one who comes to me will ever hunger. No one who believes in me will ever thirst.* If we no spiritual hunger and thirst then we need to rethink just what role Jesus plays in our lives. If we find ourselves caught up in things which stress us out, which bring fill our lives with tensions and divisions, then perhaps it is time to pause and to think through what it is we are allowing to be our "bread of life". If the fruits of our actions are pain, darkness isolation and fear, then Jesus is not our true food, for we are being fed by something more base, more human and something incapable of giving us nourishment for our life's journey.

The same must be said for our Church. If we find that we are lost in the wilderness, that we are worried about how we will continue our journey of mission, then the Gospel is telling us that we are being fed by things other than God in Jesus Christ. We are relying on the food of this world and the People of God cannot be sustained by that food.

Let God feed you would be the cry from today's readings. Pause. Stop. Repent and understand that God **wants** to feed us, **expects** to feed us for we were created with his feeding in mind. Read the signs that are visible in our lives, in our Church and we will then know whether or not we are carried by the heavenly food or weighed down by the food that does not last.