



Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 2, 2015 B

“Do not work for perishable food, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

Last Sunday, we saw how Jesus gave bread to the people in the wilderness. But when they came back the next day for more, he said to them, “Do not work for perishable food, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” One reason we come to church on Sunday is because we are in search of food that will feed our souls, our spiritual needs.

The following reflections on today’s readings are by Fr. Flor McCarthy.

Scriptural Note

The First Reading tells how God fed his people in the desert with manna. This is regarded as the classic example of God’s care for his people.

Jesus too fed people who were hungry. But the Gospel makes it clear that the Son of Man did not come down from above merely to satisfy physical hunger. He came to give a heavenly bread that people will eat and never become hungry. The manna was but a foreshadowing of the spiritual food which was now being offered by Jesus to his followers. The manna nourished people physically and sustained life temporarily. The new bread will nourish people spiritually and sustain life eternally.

The ‘bread’ in question is primarily the teaching given by Jesus. Only at a secondary level does it refer to the Eucharist.

Reflection One: Our many hungers

In 1885 Vincent van Gogh visited a museum in Amsterdam in order to see Rembrandt’s famous painting, ‘The Jewish Bride.’ Having seen it he said, “I would give ten years of my life if I could sit before this picture for a fortnight, with nothing but a crust of dry bread for food. My first hunger is not for food, though I have fasted ever so long. The desire for painting is so much stronger, that when I receive some money I start at once hunting for models until all the money is gone.”

It’s not only the body that gets hungry; the heart and the spirit get hungry too. The bread of material things can never satisfy the heart of a human being. To nourish a human being is not the same as to fatten cattle. We are creatures not with one hunger but with a hundred hungers. We hunger for lots of things besides bread.

Not all of our hungers should be satisfied. Some of them are appetites which could destroy us if we feed them. The more they are fed, the hungrier and more demanding they become. We should be aware that such appetites exist within us. But let us stay with the hungers that should be satisfied if we are to be properly nourished as human beings and children of God.

We hunger for a feeling of importance. Nobody wants to be a nobody. We all want to matter, if only to one person.

We hunger for acceptance. If we are not accepted, it becomes almost impossible for us to realize ourselves.

We hunger for relationships. Without them we are at the mercy of cold winds of anguish and loneliness. We are like a lone tree on a hilltop.

We hunger for motivation. Without it we are like a sailboat without the wind.

We hunger for faith—for a set of positive beliefs to guide us. Otherwise, we are like a ship without chart or compass or port of destination.

We hunger for hope. To give up hope is akin to going on a spiritual hunger strike.

We hunger for love. If this was fully satisfied, then most of our other hungers would disappear.

However, there is one further hunger, a deeper one, and one that underlies all our other hungers, including that of love. It is the hunger for eternal life. In other words, the hunger for God. To experience this hunger is not a misfortune but a blessing. It saves us from stagnation and keeps the stream of our lives moving forward towards the sea.

Every day we see people emerging from supermarkets with trolleys loaded down with food and drink. But we won’t find this other bread in supermarkets. If we could, we would be well nourished. Only God can give us this food. Only God can satisfy our deepest hungers.

The manna sustained life temporarily. The food Jesus gives sustains life permanently. To us, pilgrims on the street of time but driven by an irrepressible desire for immortality, Jesus comes with the promise: “He who eats the bread that I give will live forever.” Who would not want to eat of this bread?

Reflection Two: Trusting in God

The feeding of the people in the desert with manna is regarded as the classic example of God’s care for his people. Yet the manna probably was a natural

phenomenon. But this doesn't mean it wasn't a gift from God. It may have been a sweet resinous food which drips from a certain desert tree during the night and hardens in the cool of the night. It has to be collected in the early morning before it melts in the heat of the day. As for the quails: they migrate from northern Europe to Africa, and are forced down to rest in the desert, where they are easily caught.

God said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the heavens. Each day the people are to go out and gather the day's portion; I propose to test them this way to see whether they will follow my law or not." How are we to interpret these words?

If you ask the ordinary believer if he believes that God is the only God in the world, he will answer without hesitation, "Of course." But if you ask him if he trusts that God will see to it that he has all that he needs, he will be taken aback and is likely to say, "Well, I haven't reached that stage yet."

We must distinguish between faith and trust. Though they are closely linked, they are not the same thing. The person who firmly believes, trusts completely. But if someone has not perfect trust in God, his belief will be faint as well.

The desert experience was an opportunity for the Israelites to get close to God. It was meant to teach them to rely on God, to trust in Providence on a daily basis. Hence, they are told not to store up the manna so as to ensure that they will have some for tomorrow. No, they must collect only what they need for today. God will provide for them tomorrow.

Jesus taught the same truth. He said we should pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." This teaching will sound strange, and even foolish, to those who put all their trust in savings accounts, insurance policies, and warranties. We don't leave much room for God. This is the opposite to living by faith.

When all is said and done, it wasn't the manna that sustained the Israelites during their time in the desert. What sustained them was their faith and trust in God. The same 'food' is available to us. Faith and trust in God will nourish us at all times but especially during times of trial. It's not we who keep the faith; it's the faith that keeps us.

No matter how difficult life may be, for those who trust in God, and live a day at a time, the manna falls every day.

Reflection Three: The Bread that endures

In the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus had fed the people with ordinary food, and did so with great generosity. Afterwards, he and his disciples crossed the lake. But the people followed them. Jesus knew that they followed him in the hope of receiving more of the same kind of food.

But this time Jesus refused to give it to them. He wouldn't do what business people do—give people what

they want. It's called catering to consumers' tastes and pleasures. Producers simply provide what there a demand is for. Their sole aim is to try to meet the needs of the market of the potential buyer's taste.

For a spiritual teacher to do this would be a disaster. The spiritual teacher must challenge people to go beyond their tastes.

It was the first temptation all over again: turn these stones into bread. The temptation to use his special powers to give the people all the material things they could possibly want. But Jesus knew that material things by themselves will never satisfy people. These needs can never be satisfied, and increase when yielded to. Food is only the beginning. We eat in order to live; we don't live just to eat.

It was the temptation to give people what they want rather than what they need. The temptation to please the crowd by giving them what will satisfy their immediate wants, when they don't know what they really need.

Jesus made it clear that the Son of Man had not come down from above merely to satisfy people's physical hunger. He came to give them heavenly bread that people will eat and never again become hungry. He challenged them to go deeper. He said: "Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, food that the Son of Man will give you."

If Jesus had given the people more loaves and fishes, he would have made himself very popular—in the short term. After the miracle of the loaves, they called him a prophet and wanted to make him their king.

Reflection Four: One day at a time

God provided a mysterious food called manna for the Israelites during their time in the desert. However, they were told not to stockpile the manna, but to gather only what they needed for one day. Jesus told his disciples not to worry about tomorrow. He said, "When you pray to your heavenly Father, you are to say, 'Give us this day our daily bread.'" No matter how difficult life may be, for those who trust in God and who live a day at a time, the manna falls every day.

[Fr. Flor McCarthy, *New Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies*. Permission granted by Dominican Publications—www.dominicanpublications.com.]

Have a blessed week,

