

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Exodus 16.2-4, 12-15, 31)

Manna from Heaven

The journey of the people of Israel through the desert of Sinai is regarded in the Bible from two quite different angles. From one angle, it is the time of perfect harmony between God and his people, the honeymoon period when Israel was sublimely faithful to the Lord. From the other angle, it is seen as the beginning of murmuring against the Lord, which will grow into the infidelities that eventually led to Israel's punishment by the Exile to Babylon.

This account of bread from heaven shows both Israel's impatience with the Lord and the Lord's supreme patience with Israel. The historical basis is that God cared for his people and provided them with food during a generation's wandering in the savagely inhospitable desert of Sinai, a huge, infertile expanse of rock and sand, where virtually nothing grows. This care is focused on manna, a sweet substance excreted from bushes on Sinai in a way Israel found miraculous.

The story has grown in the telling: it is linked to keeping the Sabbath, for it could not be harvested on the Sabbath. Second, with typical Hebrew word play, this odd substance is linked to the Hebrew expression *manhu*, meaning 'What is it?'

Question:

Is Israel's pattern of rebellion repeated in the Church?

Second reading:

(Ephesians 4.17, 20-24)

A New Creation in Christ

In his great classic letter to the Romans, Paul teaches that by being baptized into Christ's death, we have been joined with Christ in his Resurrection and become a new being, fused with Christ or grafted into Christ. He sees us as living with Christ's life principle, the Spirit, rather than our old corrupt life principle. In First Corinthians, he enlarges on the ways of life that this brings, the varied gifts of the Spirit that together make up the Christian body, the Body of Christ.

Now, in Ephesians, we see a consequence of this. The Christian body is repeatedly described as a New Man, a new creation, after the model of the Second Adam. What does all this talk of 'new creation' amount to in real terms? First, it poses the question whether we have really been renewed. Are my values and attitudes radically new as a Christian? Do they differ from the priorities that I would have without Christianity? Particularly with regard to the Body of Christ and its ministries, do I play my part in the web of Christian activities that go to make up the Christian community? Do I really exercise my talents in a way that builds up the community?

Question:

What priorities does a Christian have which clash with those generally held?

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Gospel:

(John 6.24-35)

The Bread of Life

After the account of the miraculous feeding of the 5000, Jesus explains the significance of the event. First, he stresses that its importance lies not in the food that goes bad, but in that of which it is a sign. They must understand the sign value of the food, its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus of the manna in the desert: we live not by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

The whole explanation is built on a contrast between Moses and Jesus, between the food given by Moses and that given by Jesus. Jesus is the bread of life not only as the Eucharistic bread, but first of all as revelation.

We often concentrate exclusively on the Eucharistic meaning of this chapter. It is, however, belief and understanding that is first explained and first required, and only then is attention turned to eating the Eucharistic bread. The explanation is situated with Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum, and - after the manner of Jewish sermons of the time - each phrase of the scriptural quotation from the Book of Exodus is commented in turn: Bread from heaven/ he gave them/ to eat.

Question:

If this incident is a sign, of what is it a sign?
