

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Exodus 16:2-4.12-15 / John 6:24-35)  
05.08.2018

In today's gospel we hear Jesus say: *I am the Bread of Life*.

This image of *the bread of life* is one of a number of images employed in John's gospel to illustrate in some way Jesus' identity: who and what Jesus was for those to whom He was sent; who and what Jesus is for us.

We recall some of the other images used to describe Jesus in St John's gospel:

At the beginning of John's gospel Jesus is pointed to by the Baptist as *the Lamb of God, the One who takes away the sin of the world*, the unblemished lamb sacrificed for us; later on He speaks of Himself as *the Living Water*, the One who quenches our thirst; He also speaks of Himself as *the Good Shepherd*, the One who feeds the sheep, watches over them, cares for them and ultimately gives His life for them; yet again He also speaks of Himself as *the vine* who gives us life energy through the sap which feeds the branches His disciples are.

All these images speak of the gift Christ makes of Himself so that we may live.

When Jesus says *I am the bread of life* we are called to understand the effect of the food He gives us to eat: it is given to make us live for all eternity!

The image of God giving bread to eat is already found in today's first reading. The section from Exodus read this morning spoke of the manna given to Israel in the desert.

We might ask: Does *the bread of life* spoken of in the gospel correspond to the manna in the desert?

Well, it does and it doesn't. Let me explain myself.

It is always important when we hear one thing compared with another in the Bible to take a closer look at what is being said. While one thing is compared to another, the two are not just the same thing; while there are recognisable similarities, there are also differences between the two which should be grasped.

The differences between the two are as noteworthy as the similarities.

Let's look at the similarities and the differences between *the manna* given by God in the desert and *the bread of life* offered by Jesus in the gospel.

*The manna* spoken of in the Book of Exodus points to God's provision for the people's needs; it speaks of His care and concern for the people. It manifests how God's provision is a generous free gift. The manna comes entirely from God's graciousness. It is neither earned nor merited by the people.

Of course, the same thing could also be said of *the bread of life* given by Jesus to those whom He feeds. The bread which Jesus gives us in the Eucharist is God's provision for us, His generous free gift, a sign of the Lord's care and concern, emanating from divine graciousness. However, there is a big difference between *the manna given in the desert* for which Moses prayed and *the bread from heaven* Jesus gives in His person.

The manna was for a day. It was not to be conserved. Indeed, it couldn't be kept over – except on the eve of the Sabbath. Whatever bread might be left over was not to be eaten; it quickly lost its taste. The manna was well and truly perishable bread, given for just a moment in time.

In contrast, the bread Jesus gave was for more than just the present moment. Did Jesus not instruct the disciples to gather up the bread left over so that nothing would be lost? Evidently, the rests gathered up were to be conserved so that they might be eaten later. This could happen because the bread Jesus gave retained its good savour. Its taste did not and does not become bitter. In this respect, the bread Jesus gave and still gives is different to the manna. Different, but, nonetheless, similar.

As we have mentioned, the bread that Jesus gave had things in common with the manna provided in the desert.

The one thing that strikes me when I think in terms of the similarity between the manna given in the desert in the time of Moses and the bread Jesus had distributed to the crowds is the fact that a certain *mystery* surrounds both. The word *manna* itself means: *What is it?* The manna was something mysterious. Likewise, so too is the gift Jesus makes of Himself to us. Jesus' gift of Himself as *the bread of life* is a *mystery*.

Let's just sit with that word *mystery* for a moment.

I recall having read when I was about twelve years of age a book in which it was explained that *a mystery is not something about which we know nothing; it is something about which we shall never know everything.* I have never forgotten that phrase and often return to it.

This seems to me something very important for us to grasp. As Christians we see *the bread of life* of which the gospel speaks to be nourishment prefigured by the manna given in the desert. We regard what is given to us here to be a mysterious source of sustenance: our spiritual food. It is important for us to understand that we shall never fully fathom the gift of the Eucharist which is the *mystery* of the Lord's self-giving love. The mystery we celebrate here will always be beyond our complete comprehension. To some extent, in this regard, the Eucharist will always be akin to the manna for us. We will be forever asking ourselves: *what is it?* Ultimately, we will only ever be able to conclude that it is a mysterious gift beyond all compare.

I would like at this point to refer to a document which I find to be a most helpful. I refer to a teaching document prepared by the American bishops in 2001. In it we read this truly humble reflection on a question which we are all led to ask ourselves at times: *What is the Eucharist?* The American bishops asked: *Just what does it mean that Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine?* In their response to that question they were humble enough to include these lines: *The presence of the risen Christ in the Eucharist is an inexhaustible mystery that the Church can never fully explain in words.* They said: *We can never fully comprehend the mystery.* We must humbly accept that

While we can never fully comprehend the mystery, it is important for us to grasp – or rather not to grasp, but to give ourselves in response to – the gift that is made to us here. Cardinal Arinze speaking at Westminster Cathedral in 2006 captured well what I am wanting to say when he affirmed: *In the Eucharistic mystery our beloved Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is giving us the inestimable gift of Himself. He asks for our response.* The cardinal then went on to ask a very fundamental question which we should all ask of ourselves this morning, having tried, as we have done, to begin to answer the question: *Just what is the Eucharist?* Cardinal Arinze left his listeners with this question in the last line of his discourse at Westminster: *Shall we refuse to pay our beloved Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ back with love?*

The late Benedictine Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Basil Hume, OSB, captured the idea of the Christ's Eucharistic presence being essentially *a mystery of love* when he shared his experience thus: *I believe that in a marvellous way, Christ is truly present [here in this mystery]. If you ask me how this is, that is theology. But you genuflect because Christ has said so. If you try to work out how and why it, you will never get there. You receive the truth from Him. As in friendship, love between two people, you don't work why you love them – it would kill the spark between you if you analysed it. But once you love a person, then you grow in the knowledge of them. That is what faith is like, the beginning of a love story. The more you get involved then the more you begin to trust.*

Elsewhere, in another context – but once again speaking of his experience of Eucharist – Basil Hume said: *Trusting God when things are not clear is one of the hardest things to do, but one of the greatest marks of our love.*

Gathered here this morning, let us return love for love. The Lord gives Himself to us in the bread of life, let us give our lives back to the Lord so that He may consume them. The Lord invites us to consume His life. May we leave Him free to consume ours. That is what lovers do: they give themselves to each other in consummation.

Amen!