

Jesus Our Food (18th Sunday)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John: (Jn. 6: 24-35)

When the people saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into boats and crossed to Capernaum to look for Jesus. When they found him on the other side, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you most solemnly, you are not looking for me because you have seen the signs but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat. Do not work for the food that cannot last, but work for food that endures to eternal life, the kind of food the Son of Man is offering you, for on him the Father, God himself, has set his seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do if we are to do the works that God wants?"

Jesus gave them this answer, "This is working for God: you must believe in the one he has sent."

So they said: "What sign will you give to show us that we should believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers had manna to eat in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus answered: "I tell you most solemnly, it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and give life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "give us that bread always."

Jesus answered, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst."

This is the Gospel of the Lord

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Last Sunday, we saw how Jesus provided food for the people who had come to listen to him, and we learnt that he continues to provide both, spiritual and material food, for all mankind.

The message which the readings of today convey is expressed in the last three lines of today's Gospel: "*I am the bread of life: he who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst*" (Jn. 6: 35)

Put in other words: *Through faith, Jesus becomes our spiritual food and drink; thus he offers himself to be our nourishment when we sincerely believe in him.*

The first reading of this Sunday is about how God provided food and drink for the Israelites in the desert.

The journey through the desert was not an easy one, and soon food became scarce. Instead of putting their trust in God and humbly beg from Him the food they needed, the people started grumbling against Moses, and in a way, against God.

God sent them an extraordinary food to eat: the Manna. And since the Israelites clamoured for meat, God sent quails in large numbers, which the Israelites easily killed. Everyone ate as much meat as he wanted (Ex. 16: 13-15).

- Soon after, there was scarcity of water. One would say that the Israelites should have learnt to trust in God who had provided them with the Manna. But no; they revolted against Moses once again, and so violently, that Moses feared for his life.

In spite of their ungratefulness, God caused water to spring from a rock in such abundance that the whole people drank and their beasts too (Ex. 17: 1-7).

The journey through the desert lasted forty years. The book of Exodus which narrates that journey makes two things clear: (1) Time and again, the Israelites proved ungrateful and unfaithful to Yahweh. (2) Yahweh instead, proved infinitely patient with his people and showed his mercy towards them at all times, even when he had to allow misfortunes to come upon them, as the only way to bring them back to himself.

This is the lesson contained in this Sunday's first reading: God loved his people in spite of their unfaithfulness.

Before we proceed with our explanation on the Gospel of this Sunday, let us see what happened after the multiplication of the loaves narrated in the Gospel of last Sunday:

It was already evening when Jesus fed the people with the loaves and fish he had miraculously multiplied. He knew the people would respond enthusiastically to the miracle and that his apostles would be the first to welcome the idea of proclaiming him king. So he hastened to get them out of the way, ordering them to get into the boat and cross over to Capernaum, on the opposite side of the lake. He would handle the crowds himself.

He remained with the crowd for some time and then disappeared from their midst, before they could acclaim him as king and Messiah. The Messiah they had in mind was not what He had come to be. He, therefore, withdrew unnoticed to the nearby hills and spent the night in conversation with his Father, in prayer.

In the meantime, in spite of several hours of hard rowing, the apostles were still far from Capernaum. A strong wind prevented them from making headway. Jesus came to them in the early hours of the morning, walking over the water. John does not narrate the incident of Peter going to Jesus over the water at Jesus' invitation. He just says that once Jesus entered the boat, they reached Capernaum in no time.

The next morning, the crowd having searched for Jesus in vain, went back to Capernaum looking for him. It was at Capernaum that took place what is narrated in the Gospel.

- Jesus had multiplied the loaves and fish for a double purpose:

- *Out of concern for the people* who chose to be hungry rather than miss his teaching.

- *to help the people understand* the important message he meant to teach them at Capernaum the next day.

Jesus certainly is an excellent teacher. They make use of examples and comparisons to explain a difficult point to their pupils. Jesus made use of a striking miracle to help the Jews accept him as their spiritual food.

He knew that many among them would refuse altogether learning the lesson. *When reading chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, we find that the Jews put several questions to Jesus, some out of curiosity, others seemingly with a bad intention.*

With patience and wisdom, Jesus took up their questions and made them the starting point to further explain his message.

Let us examine three of those questions found in today's Gospel:

The first question was: "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

- They were curious to know. There had been only one boat on the other side and the apostles had made use of it to cross to Capernaum, and Jesus was not on board when they left. How could he have crossed over?

- Jesus did not reply to their question but launched right away into what he wanted to tell them. I am summing up Jesus' explanation:

"You would like me to repeat the wonder I worked out yesterday. But I tell you: do not look for bodily food. Bodily food gives you life only for a time; no matter how well fed you are, you all will die all the same. Look for spiritual food, the food that keeps people truly alive, and alive for ever. Such is the food I am offering you; God's will is that you accept it."

The second question that they raised was: "What does God want us to do?"

Apparently, the question shows that they were searching for the truth in sincerity. It soon became clear that they were not. Jesus took their question at face value and gave them the right answer: "*You must believe in the one God has sent*" (Jn. 6, 29). In other words: God's will is that you believe in me.

The final question was: "What sign will you give to show us that we should believe in you?"

In other words, "Why should we believe in you? Prove with a miracle that you really come from God. We believe in Moses because, among other wonders, he gave the Manna to our forefathers in the desert; he gave them food from heaven; but you ... *what are you capable of doing?*" (Jn. 6, 31)

We might find the blindness of those Jews incredible! Jesus had fed them the previous evening by working a wonder far surpassing anything narrated in the Scripture, and yet they dared question Jesus with scorn: "What are you capable of doing?"

But let us note that the ones arguing with Jesus are not the simple people of the crowd but the religious leaders bent on destroying the influence Jesus was gradually gaining with the common people.

Nevertheless, patiently, with unalterable calm in spite of their stubbornness and pride, Jesus answered their question and made use of it to make clear what he wanted to tell them. Here is the meaning of what he said:

You boast that Moses gave the Manna to your ancestors; you are wrong. It was not Moses but my Father who provided that miraculous food for your forefathers. That Manna did not really come from heaven; there is a new food which my Father offers to you, and this one, yes, it has come down from heaven: *I am that food! The purpose of my coming is to serve as nourishment to all mankind that all may have life, eternal life.*

Pride prevented the Jews from grasping the true meaning of Jesus' words. They were still thinking in terms of material food, a food easy to get, that would save them the trouble of working for it. Perhaps out of curiosity or most probably jeering at him, they said: "Sir, give us this food always ... "

- Jesus ignored their selfishness and pride and went on to clearly state his message for them and for all men to come: *"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst"* (Jn. 6: 35)
That is:

- Jesus becomes the nourishment of those who believe in him. What material food is to the body, that and more is Jesus to us; the source of our spiritual life and strength
- There is no alternative to the food that Jesus himself is; deprived of him, we are doomed to die spiritually.

There are significant differences between material food and the food that Jesus offers, i.e. himself.

One important difference is this: we change material food into ourselves; the food we take becomes in us flesh, blood and bones. Not so with Jesus: when accepting him as our nourishment, we do not change him into ourselves, but rather, it is he who changes us unto himself. The transformation goes on throughout life: fed with Jesus and by Jesus, we gradually become another Christ. The transformation should be complete by the time we die.

Jesus put only one condition to become our food, i.e., *that we believe in him* (Jn. 6: 35).

But when we say: "I believe in Jesus Christ", what do we really mean?

The answer could fill many pages, but we shall try to give it in a few lines. To *truly believe in Jesus* amounts to saying:

- *I accept as true all that Jesus taught and continues to teach today through his Church.*

- *I am ready to obey his commandments.*
- *I entrust myself totally to him, all that I have and all that I am.*
- *Whatever might happen to me in life, I will always believe in his love for me. Let him do with me as he pleases.*

- In other words, to believe in Christ means to make him the centre of our life.

Saint Paul in this Sunday's reading explains to us what believing in Christ really means:

a) *It means to give up our life of sin:*

- Paul says that the life of non-Christians is aimless. A man without faith does not know where he came from or where he is going to. He goes through life as a man who has lost his way in a forest, walking without a fixed direction, often coming back, without noticing it, to the place from which he started.

On the contrary, faith in Christ makes clear to us Christians the purpose of our life, i.e., that we are people on our way to heaven. Faith is for us a lantern that lights our way here

b) *Faith in Christ means to live an altogether new life:*

Paul likes to compare life to a dress. Christians discard the old, filthy rags of sin to replace them with a new dress, the dress of Life in the Spirit.

"To put on Christ", as Paul likes to say, means to think, to speak, and to act at every step the way Christ would do, were He in our situation.

It is to those who truly believe in him that Jesus offers himself as nourishment both in this life and in the life to come.

So, let us pray: Father in heaven, faith in your son Jesus is your gift to us; help us to put our trust in him more completely that his life in us may grow from strength to strength. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen