

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

1 August 2021



Collect

Draw near to your servants, O Lord,
and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness,
that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide,
you may restore what you have created
and keep safe what you have restored.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Amid the constant bombardment of advertising that promotes convenience foods, there are also plenty of warnings about the dangers they pose to our health. To pay attention to these is to discover that much of the processed food that we eat has little nutritional value. Worse still it is usually riddled with ingredients that are quite detrimental to our health.

Is there a parallel with the food we feed to our minds? Do we think twice about whether it's nourishing or just junk? Does what we read and talk about feed our hearts with wisdom and truth and love, or does it go to maintain our anxieties and reinforce our negative attitudes? This is the question raised for us by Jesus' exchange with the crowd after they have been fed. On what do we feed? What do we truly hunger and thirst for, and what steps do we take to nurture our inmost selves? Today's word of God offers us the opportunity to look again.

A reading from the book of Exodus 16:2–4, 12–15

The whole community of the sons of Israel began to complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and said to them, 'Why did we not die at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content! As it is, you have brought us to this wilderness to starve this whole company to death!'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Now 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 in this way to see whether they will follow my law or not.'

'I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel. Say this to them, "Between the two evenings you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have bread to your heart's content. Then you will learn that I, the Lord, am your God.'" And so it came about: quails flew up in the evening, and they covered the camp; in the morning there was a coating of dew all round the camp. When the coating of dew lifted, there on the surface of the desert was a thing delicate, powdery, as fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When they saw this, the sons of Israel said to one another, 'What is that?' not knowing what it was. 'That' said Moses to them 'is the bread the Lord gives you to eat.'

First Reading

The story of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt demonstrates the unrivalled power of their God. It is also a story about the human condition. It doesn't take long for the people's patience to run out and nostalgia to set in. As they complain about the hardships of the journey, the Israelites look back fondly on the past. They may have been oppressed in Egypt but there were compensations: life was secure and predictable and bellies were full. Their new freedom has brought uncertainty.

The reading recounts how their complaints were heard and answered by the Lord. They were fed with quails (migratory birds resting overnight from their exhausting journey) and with manna (perhaps the secretion of insects that had fed on desert plants). The name "manna" may derive from the people's question "what is that?".

The first two-thirds of the reading consists in the rather irritated exchange between Israel and the Lord, with Moses caught in between. The Lord's reply to Israel has a touch of exasperation about it, like a parent conceding to a demanding child. The final third of the passage describes the gift of the quail and the manna, and the people's wonder at the latter. Readers will serve their congregations well if they prepare the reading carefully enough to be able to convey the changing moods of the story. A moment's pause before the last sentence will highlight the concluding declaration that is taken up in the gospel.

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 77:3–4, 23–25, 54**

R. The Lord gave them bread from heaven.

The things we have heard and understood,
the things our fathers have told us,
we will tell to the next generation:
the glories of the Lord and his might. R.

He commanded the clouds above
and opened the gates of heaven.
He rained down manna for their food,
and gave them bread from heaven. R.

Mere men ate the bread of angels.
He sent them abundance of food.
He brought them to his holy land,
to the mountain which his right hand had won. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 77/78 is quite long. It recounts the history of Israel from the exodus down to the time of David. God's saving love for his people is contrasted with their repeated disobedience and waywardness. The response, taken from the body of the psalm, forges a direct link with the end of the first reading.

The verses are drawn from quite different parts of the psalm. The first verse comes from the introductory section which states that the psalm is intended to teach succeeding generations about Israel's chequered history. This is the verse that calls for most preparation on the part of the reader.

The second verse and the first half of the third come from the middle part of the psalm. These lines recall the story of the manna that we have just heard. The last two lines of the third verse are taken from much later in the psalm. All of a sudden we move from the manna in the desert to Israel's arrival in the promised land. These two verses should be straightforward enough for the reader to proclaim.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Ephesians**

4:17, 20–24

I want to urge you in the name of the Lord, not to go on living the aimless kind of life that pagans live. Now that is hardly the way you have learnt from Christ, unless you failed to hear him properly when you were taught what the truth is in Jesus. You must give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to John**

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 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 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 gives 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.'

Second Reading

Two Sundays ago we heard the good news that Jews and pagans (Gentiles) had been united in a common humanity by the saving death of Christ. In today's passage from Ephesians the author returns to an earlier stereotype of the Gentiles as living an "aimless kind of life". In the verses that follow but which have been omitted from the lectionary they are described as unenlightened and unredeemed.

The Ephesians are being urged to live out their new baptismal identity. The phrases "put aside" and "put on" call to mind the baptismal practice of discarding one's old clothes to go down into the waters of the font and rising from them to be dressed in new white robes. Of course this is not simply an external change; it is a sign of what is meant to happen within: "Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution".

Readers will quickly see that the negative tone of much of the passage finally comes to a positive conclusion. The last sentence is the climax of the reading. It should be given clear and deliberate emphasis. In God's hands baptised believers have become a new creation.

Gospel

In every gospel except that of Luke the feeding story is followed by that of Jesus walking on the stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee. This episode plus a short bridging passage is passed over in silence by the lectionary. We pick up the story at the point where the people who had seen Jesus feeding the crowd cross the lake to find him.

In the discourse that follows, a familiar pattern can be discerned. Time and again in the gospel of John, questions are put to Jesus that he never answers directly. Instead he responds obliquely with teaching that provokes further questioning. This is how, for example, he leads the Samaritan woman and the blind man along their path of faith (Jn 4 & 9).

In this passage the people ask three questions: how did you get here? how can we do the works of God? what sign will you give us? Jesus replies to each in turn: work for the food of eternal life; the work of God is to believe in him; my Father gives you true bread from heaven. In no case does he allow the question to determine his answer. He is in charge of the dialogue. Essentially each of his replies is telling the people that they are asking the wrong question.

If this reading is well proclaimed it should enable the congregation to sense some of the frustration of Jesus' interrogators. Their questions seem reasonable but not one of them is answered plainly. Jesus keeps leading his audience deeper and deeper into unknown territory. From our 21st century vantage point we can see what is happening, but we should still allow ourselves to be challenged and confused by Jesus' tactics. Even now we need to have our frame of reference subverted if we are to discover the truth that will make us free.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time V)

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us
and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,
that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.

Amen.

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,
and be found ever hastening along
in the path of God's commands,
made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time V, Roman Missal p. 716)