

Pentecost 11, Year B, Manna in the Wilderness, 4 August 2024

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 Psalm 78:23-29 Ephesians 4:1-16 John 6:24-35

What do angels eat for breakfast? Not angel cake but manna, at least that's what Asaph wrote in Psalm 78 (v.24-25a).

God rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven. Human beings ate the bread of angels.

Manna was so much more than bread in the wilderness, so much more than something to satisfy physical hunger and needs. It was spiritual food. Paul calls it such in 1 Corinthians (10:3). It was God's gracious provision, the undeserved favour of God, that brought life to lives. Eating it united the people with the LORD in some way, just as the bread of the Eucharist does for us.

There were those among the Israelites in the desert who failed to understand this, as we read in Numbers (11:4-6).

⁴ The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. ⁶ But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" Same old, same old.

Do the people in our gospel reading asking Jesus for a sign like the provision of manna in the wilderness understand what manna is? No, they don't get it. They are not after spiritual food. Jesus says that they pursue him across the Sea of Galilee *because you ate the loaves and had your fill*, not because they perceived the feeding of the 5000 as something spiritual, a miracle signifying who Jesus is.

But Jesus says *Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*

Well, this seems to get the crowd going. Perhaps they wonder if this food is like the manna that lasted from Friday to Sabbath without going off, food that endures, food without effort.

And, perhaps because they hear Jesus speaking of having God's seal of approval, they ask "*What must we do to do the works God requires?*" What must we do to get this food?

The crowd really can't think in spiritual terms; they have a religious mind-set. *What must we do?* For them the approval of God is about doing something to warrant it. It's such an enticing thought that's so easy to fall into, isn't it? But *Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."* Not doing, not just believing, but believing *in Jesus, the one God has sent.*

What does it mean to believe *in Jesus*? It is so much more than believing facts about him, even that he died for our sin and rose again. It is about trusting, trusting that his work is the basis for our entry into the God's favour without trying to do any other "works" of our own to bring it about.

For the crowd it is trusting that Jesus is God's promised Messiah who will inaugurate the Kingdom of God. It is about rooting for him and responding positively to him.

For us it is about being united with Him in his death and resurrection; it affects our daily lives. Paul puts it this way in Colossians (3:1-3):

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

But why should this crowd believe in him? Who is Jesus anyway? And, fixated on food - remember this is shortly after the feeding of the 5000 – the crowd asks "*What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*"

Give us a sign to prove yourself. The feeding of 5000 doesn't count; that was just ordinary bread, a one-off and we're hungry again. Preferably give us manna to eat, that supernatural but physical and tangible daily provision which will keep us ever satisfied.

Scholars tell us that there was a belief at the time that when the Messiah appeared he would give them manna as proof of who he was, possibly even the manna that was in a jar in the temple when the temple was destroyed in 586 BC. Manna which, some said, had been spirited away by Jeremiah.

This crowd is not so very different from the Israelites in the wilderness. The Israelites grumbled that life with God was not as they wanted it to be, ignoring the gracious provision of God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into freedom. (And perhaps we can be a little like this too.) The crowd with Jesus is grumbling that the work God requires of them is not what they want. They don't want to believe in Jesus, not just like that. They want what their ancestors had: manna, bread in the wilderness. But they don't understand.

Here again is the temptation that Jesus faced in the wilderness (Matthew 4:3-4) *"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."* And you remember how Jesus replied *"It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Where does that quote come from? It comes from Deuteronomy (8:3) spoken by Moses while the Israelites were still in the desert.

God humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Manna was not bread; it was supernatural, spiritual food. It was, in a sense, God's word.

Which brings us full circle back to Jesus, who is The Word of God, as John tells us at the beginning of his gospel (John 1:1). The Bread of Life is the Word of God.

And the Word of God tells us that to be fed we need to come to him and believe in him. He is our daily manna.

Manna in the wilderness always pointed forwards to Jesus, the Bread of Life, the Word of God.

And in some ways we are in the wilderness too. Our Promised Land is still future. Because while it is both now - we can experience its blessings today – it is also not yet. We are not yet inhabiting the Promised Land.

Maybe you feel this. That you are in a wilderness place, dry, hungry, unsatisfied. Whether we do or not feel unsatisfied, we still need manna in the wilderness. We need Jesus, the Bread of Life. We are to feed on him.

Jesus is our manna in our wilderness. We are to feed on him. Feed on him through our relationship with him by his Spirit, feed on him through the written word of God, the Bible, feed on him by co-interceding with him in prayer.

The Israelites in the wilderness had to work for their manna. Sure, it was, like Jesus, the free gift of God, but they had to take time to go out daily to collect it (except on the Sabbath). They had to take time to prepare it. They had to stop, eat and digest it.

And I wonder, do we do that with Jesus, the Bread of Life? Stop, eat and digest? Do we feed on him daily, our manna in the wilderness? Amen

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