

20th Sunday in Ordinary time. Year A

Exodus 16:2-15

Romans 11: 13-16,29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

Today we have the wandering people of God – looking for food!

It is no secret that when it comes to the provision of food I am severely challenged! Left alone in the kitchen all I seem to be able to create is an array of burnt saucepans. With no ‘service provider’ I become seriously dependent on 2 minute noodles (surely today’s ‘manna from heaven’!) and I’m known to take up a second home somewhere between KFC and Fisherman’s Lane! So today I can identify with the anxiety of those souls in the Sinai desert searching for food.

I should also say that the wonderful spiritual discipline of fasting is something about which I can preach but find difficult to practice. By 3.00 in the afternoon if I’ve had nothing since 8.0am my sugar level drops and I become decidedly grumpy – I begin to share the Israelite ‘grumbling’. The truth is that I’ve been spoilt sufficiently to feel some anxiety if I don’t know where the next meal is coming from!

So whose fault is it – who do we blame – for bringing us to this inhospitable place – with no food and water – at least in Egypt, we may have been oppressed, but at least we were fed! And so they complained against Moses – Moses, of course, tried to pass the buck – ‘Don’t blame me’ he said – ‘God called us out of Egypt – I am obeying his command – we are all following his will and must depend on his promises.’

God’s promise you remember around the provision of this rather odd supply of food we heard about today comes with some precise directions.

‘You must not take more than you need. Mr. Delivery will come every day except the Sabbath – so on the 6th day you can pick up a double portion!’

This incidentally is a critical bit of ethical teaching for today’s world. We know that we have sufficient resources for the world’s need but not for the world’s greed.

‘Give us this day our daily bread’ is sometimes usefully translated as ‘give us today the bread that we need.’

So God rains down their daily portion of thin flakes like frost. ‘What is it?’ they said ‘Manna’ in Hebrew.

‘It’s the bread’ said Moses, ‘that God has promised you that comes from heaven to sustain you on your journey.’

And so begins one of the great Christian metaphors of all time.

We’re not talking about daily intake of calories and nutrition, we’re talking about our Christian lives, our spiritual journey through life, we’re talking about being sustained by the sometimes mysterious and even unrecognizable gifts that God rains down upon us:

That well timed phone call,
a strange meeting,
a new opportunity.

Even those unforeseen calamities , the strains and stresses of those happenings in our lives that we read as unfortunate experiences, but we know that as we come through them we emerge somehow stronger for the journey ahead.

The other day I was checking on a candidates references for a job – when the referee said ‘She has know a lot of pain in her life but she has become the stronger for it’.

So a question arises ‘What is it that sustains you?
What strengthens you, what supports you on your journey?’

First think of those wonderful moments which leave you feeling overwhelmed by gratitude.

Let those deep human experiences exhilarate you

Let the love of your family and friends nourish you

Don’t be afraid to actively pursue those activities and experiences that bring you to life

Don’t wait until you’re retired, don’t wait until your too old to do the things you love.

Remember ‘if you do the things you love – you will love the things you do.’

These things may look as if they have nothing to do with Christ or the church – but they may just have everything to do with the fullness of life that Jesus promises us in John chapter 10.

But the metaphor comes to its own when Christ himself uses this desert story and places himself at its centre, taking the place of the manna.

In John 6., that’s the chapter to read on this, the people are asking again for a sign – as our fathers ate manna in the desert

As it is written ‘ he gave them bread from heaven to eat;’

Jesus replies ‘Its not Moses who has given you bread from heaven – but my Father for the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven to give life to the world.’

‘Give us this bread’ they cry

‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never grow hungry. He who believes in me – will never be thirsty.

You father ate manna in the desert but died – there is bread from heaven which you may eat and live.

I am the living bread that came from heaven eat of this and you will live forever.’

And then in the narrative of the last supper that same bread of heaven becomes his body broken for you and me.

As Christians we must make these important connections because only then will we fully understand the words and the liturgy.

Just as I said we must pursue those gifts of life that bring us to life – so we must pursue the one who is life – the one whose life comes to life in us as we eat the bread of the communion. Even when we feel we are not deserving of the blessing we must pursue these things.

And here we have the example of another powerful and persistent women – in this women's month. Her name is Noranna. Sometimes in St Mark she is called the Syro-phonician woman, in St Matthew she is called significantly a 'Canaanite' woman. It's important to notice where Matthew puts this story – it's between two feeding miracles, where the followers of Jesus are also getting a bit anxious as to where the next meal is coming from!

But God provides the sustenance from heaven from the child's offering of five loaves and two fish. God feeds his own people, but notice in the first story we have 12 baskets left over for all the 12 tribes of Israel and in the second story 7 baskets left over symbolising the 7 outside nations, notoriously the 7 evil or gentile nations of which Canaan is the worst.

So with Noranna's story you begin to see what Matthew is getting at – that maybe this promise of spiritual sustenance in life is not just for the chosen people the Jews but extends to all those who are seen as outsiders.

And in the middle of this section Jesus tries to explain this – about who is clean and who is unclean who the insider is and who is the outsider.

It was a difficult lesson for the Jewish people to get, and the way Matthew brings in the story almost suggests that Jesus might just be playing out this moment in order that they might understand.

A foreign national, living near where Jesus was staying trying to get away from it all in Sidon – she hears about this great man, has a daughter with a serious mental illness, she comes and asks Jesus for help. In fact she pursues Jesus- she is remarkably persistent. Some people think that it was in fact the disciples that gave her a hard time, trying to protect their master

'Our master is resting he's too tired'

'He has come only for the lost sheep of Israel'

'It's not right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs.'

Either way there is a three fold rebuttal.

Perhaps Jesus was testing her commitment, her faith, before giving in to her requests.

Perhaps he was calling for a three fold faith commitment. Noranna remains faithful almost liturgically Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy

'Lord son of David have mercy on me'

Response 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel'

Noranna persists 'Lord help me!'

Response 'It's not right to take the Children's bread and give it to the dogs'

Noranna persist 'Lord even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table.'
Response 'Woman you have great faith.'

The foreigner is fed, the daughter is healed.

Jesus and Noranna reaching out to each other across cultural and religious boundaries.
Could they be crossed in spite of the local customs, in spite of the religious norms – its almost as if they were testing each other.

'How fare can we go?'

How far do we dare to go for the sake of the kingdom?

What a remarkable experience yesterday – as we went beyond the walls of this church and took the good news to all those people at Kensington Old Age Home, singers dancers, lay leaders, it was wonderful for me to see the church active and out there. And then on Wednesday a number of us crossing the generation gap and taking on those students at CPUT – we connected, we crossed the barriers
We have proved that with faith we can break down the barriers of difference with the gospel of the kingdom!

That was the lesson learnt in Sidon

That is the lesson that Noranna brings to us

That the gospel extends beyond our borders, that manna from heaven is food for all.

Whether you are Zimbabwean, Malawian, Congolese, Somalian, Mozambiquan, we come as one to the table of the Lord.

The message is clearly understood by Paul, calling himself today – 'the apostle to the gentiles.' 'In Christ' he said 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile – we are one in Christ.'

Today's church in Cape Town finds itself with a crucial role to play in countering any further outbreaks of xenophobic violence

This is the gospel we must proclaim

That in Christ, there is no 'other'

We are one.

But one last thing. As well as her persistence – Noranna showed us something else – it was her humility, it was her recognition of her own unworthiness to receive, that brought her the divine healing

Her words have been immortalized for us in what we call the *prayer of humble access* that we say every Sunday as we approach Jesus in the Eucharist.

All she is asking for are the crumbs from the table – you remember the prayer
'we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table'.

So the liturgy teaches us again that we come as gentiles, we are the outsider, and we come with a knowledge of our own brokenness willing to receive just the crumbs that fall from the Lord's table.

The crumbs, the thin wafers, that strange manna from heaven, the bread of life that entered the world, lived and died for us,
his body,
his life absorbed onto ours.

So the metaphor is complete.

As we come to the Eucharist today let us give thanks for the sustenance that God brings to us, the food of eternal life, that will always be more than enough to guide and strengthen us on our way.

Amen

Fr John Oliver