

Weekend Readings & Reflections

July 31/August 1, 2021 – 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reflection: *The journey of discipleship is a lifelong exodus from the slavery of sin and death to the holiness of truth on Mount Zion, the promised land of eternal life. The road can get rough. And when it does, we can be tempted to complain like the Israelites in this week's First Reading. We have to see these times of hardship as a test of what is in our hearts, a call to trust God more and to purify the motives for our faith (Deuteronomy 8:2–3). As Paul reminds us in this week's Epistle, we must leave behind our old self-deceptions and desires and live according to the likeness of God in which we are made. Jesus tells the crowd in this week's Gospel that they are following Him for the wrong reasons. They seek Him because He filled their bellies. The Israelites, too, were content to follow God so long as there was plenty of food. Food is the most obvious of signs - because it is the most basic of our human needs. We need our daily bread to live. But we cannot live by this bread alone. We need the bread of eternal life that preserves those who believe in Him (Wisdom 16:20, 26). The manna in the wilderness, like the bread Jesus multiplied for the crowd, was a sign of God's Providence—that we should trust that He will provide. These signs pointed to their fulfillment in the Eucharist, the abundant bread of angels we sing about in this week's Psalm. This is the food that God longs to give us. This is the bread we should be seeking. But too often we don't ask for this bread. Instead we seek the perishable stuff of our everyday wants and anxieties. In our weakness we think these things are what we really need. We have to trust God more. If we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, all these things will be ours as well (Matthew 6:33).*



OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Welcome to our study on the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let us pray together from Philippians:

All: And this is my prayer: That your love for one another may grow more and more with the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to come to true discernment, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, entirely filled with the fruits of uprightness through Jesus Christ, For the glory and praise of God. Amen. (Philippians 1:9-11)

Leader: We are not the first people to seek after miracles from God. In today's readings, we see both the Israelites and the crowds surrounding Jesus acting like we do when we want God to prove his existence or to give us what we want. It is almost like we are treating God like a vending machine – I go to God, I give him what he wants, and then I get exactly what I want out of him. The pagans of ancient Greece and Rome treated their “gods” in a very similar way. Obviously, God is not a vending machine, but we still fall into treating him this way so often! This understanding of God is very different from the true God, who is our good and loving Father and always knows what is truly best for us.

DIGGING DEEPER



A FIELD OF WILDFLOWERS

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux asked God why some people seemed to be given so much, while others, much less. She realized that we are like a field of wildflowers. If a field were nothing but extravagant red roses, it would be boring. Some of us are daisies and some lilies, and so on—each one pleasing to God and a very important part of his plan and its beauty. It's important to recognize who we are and to accept the gifts God has given us with a grateful heart, rather than envying others.

FIRST READING ~ Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 ~

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "Would that we had died at the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!" Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will now rain down bread from heaven for you. Each day the people are to go out and gather their daily portion; thus will I test them, to see whether they follow my instructions or not. "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them: In the evening twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread, so that you may know that I, the LORD, am your God." In the evening quail came up and covered the camp. In the morning a dew lay all about the camp, and when the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground. On seeing it, the Israelites asked one another, "What is this?" for they did not know what it was. But Moses told them, "This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

The Exodus story teaches us of our covenant relationship with God. Each time the people grumbled, Moses prayed to God, and God responded faithfully to his covenant love commitment. Remembering the first reading is chosen to highlight the Gospel reading, John 6 and Exodus are both reflecting on the meaning of the Jewish 'Passover'. The treasured memory of God feeding his people with 'manna' (literally from the word 'man hu' meaning 'what is this?') was an essential part of the Passover celebration. Rather ungratefully, God's people continually grumbled.

- Do I grumble frequently against Moses and Aaron? How could I speak words of 'affirmation'? How could I practice gratefulness for the 'daily feeding' by God of every gift and blessing?

SECOND READING ~ 2 Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 ~

Brothers and sisters: I declare and testify in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; that is not how you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, that you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.



Parts of the Letter to the Ephesians are prayers used at Baptism in the early church community. A colorful image is pointed to in the Baptism ceremony. In ancient times one's clothing was considered part of oneself. In the ceremony you took off your old clothes and put on a new white garment. Your old self was put aside. Your new self is the life of Christ. Your new life-style is as a citizen of Heaven not a citizen of Rome.

- How could you show Righteousness, Holiness, and Truth more in your life? Amongst your family? At work?

GOSPEL ~ John 6:24-35~

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. And when they found him across the sea they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered them and said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal." So they said to him, "What can we do to accomplish the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." So they said to him, "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat? So Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." So they said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

The crowd asks for proof from Jesus that he is 'better' than Moses who fed Israel with 'manna' in the desert. Jesus responds using a very important phrase: 'I AM the bread of Life'. I AM is the divine name given by God to Moses in Ex 3,16. Jesus reminds the crowd that it was God not Moses who fed his people, and in fact, I AM is standing right in front of you.

- **The Gospel of John often requires the reader to step down into deeper levels of meaning. Never hungry and never thirsty recognises a physical 'hunger' and invites the reader to recognise a deeper spiritual hunger and thirst for life. Beyond feeding your body and satisfying your thirst, what do you really live for? What is 'life' for?**
- **Many people came seeking Jesus but they did not want to follow him. Jesus will soon make the connection that He is and will become the 'bread of God' from Heaven which gives life. He will do this with the gift of his 'Body' and his 'Blood' on the cross which will be received in the celebration of the Mass John 6, 55. Do you 'see' that you truly receive Jesus at Mass? Do you 'seek' AND 'follow' Jesus?**

MEDITATION

Is there anything in this life that can truly satisfy our deepest hunger and longing? Many sought Jesus out because he offered them something no one else could give - bread from heaven from the very hand of God himself. When Jesus had performed the miracle of multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish to provide a refreshing and satisfying meal for more than 5000 people (see John 6:1-15), they wanted to make him their king - no doubt because they wanted more. When Jesus withdrew from the crowd and quietly returned to Capernaum to be with his twelve disciples, they ran to seek him there (John 6:24-25). Jesus met them with a probing question - are you looking for physical food that perishes or food that gives eternal life? The Jews had always regarded the manna in the wilderness as the *bread of God* (Psalm 78:24, Exodus 16:15). There was a strong Rabbinic belief that when the Messiah came he would give manna from heaven. This was the supreme work of Moses. Now the Jewish leaders were demanding that Jesus produce manna from heaven as proof to his claim to be the Messiah. Jesus responds by telling them that it was not Moses who gave the manna, but God. And the manna given to Moses and the people was not the real bread from heaven, but only a symbol of the bread to come. Jesus makes the claim which only God can make: *I am the bread of life*. The bread which Jesus offers is none else than the very life of God. This is the true bread which can truly satisfy the hunger in our hearts. The manna from heaven prefigured the superabundance of the unique bread of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper which Jesus gave to his disciples on the eve of his sacrifice. The manna in the wilderness sustained the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. It could not produce eternal life for the Israelites.

Jesus' question to the crowd, and to each one of us as well, echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy*" (Isaiah 55:2)? There are two fundamental types of hunger - physical and spiritual. Only the Lord Jesus can satisfy the deepest hunger in our heart - the hunger for everlasting truth, life, and love. Jesus alone can satisfy the eternal hunger of our heart, mind, and spirit.

- Do you hunger for the bread which comes down from heaven and thirst for the words of everlasting life?

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: In closing, let us now pray ...

ALL: Lord Jesus, you are the true Bread of Heaven. Only you alone can truly satisfy the deepest longing and hunger of my heart. Nourish me with the bread of life that I may be truly satisfied in you alone as the giver of life.

Leader: (if time, let us offer up our intercessions ... St. Michael... Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be...)
Amen.

[Opening reflection was shared from St. Paul Center at <https://stpaulcenter.com/studies-tools/sunday-bible-reflections>]

[video can be found at FORMED.ORG "Opening the Word". Additional reflections can be found at FORMED in "Opening the Word"]

[Discussion questions created by Fr Frank Bird sm, Marist Priest, and distributed by www.maristlitynz.org, were shared with permission from www.livingtheword.org.nz.]

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