

Ninth Sunday after Trinity
August 2, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 6:24-35

After the people of Israel had eaten their Passover meal and begun their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, they complained to Moses of their want. They told him that in Egypt they had at least had enough to eat, even if they had been suffering under the yoke of slavery. They accused God of taking them out of Egypt only to let them starve in the desert.

The Lord's response was to send the people manna from heaven. Every morning when they awoke there would be a fine flakey substance on the ground. Moses instructed them to collect as much as they needed for each day, but not to try and store it up. They were to live by faith that the manna would appear the next day and every day; and if they did try to store it up, the manna would become rancid.

In the Gospel today Jesus tells the people whom He fed that this manna had not come from Moses, but from God. It had been sent from God to sustain the lives of the Israelites as they progressed towards the Promised Land. Eating the manna, however, did not get the Israelites into the Promised Land automatically. Rather, the people that the Lord had freed from slavery and then sustained in the wilderness were required to be faithful. They weren't. And as a result none of the people who came out of slavery and crossed through the Red Sea, not even Moses, was allowed to cross the Jordan into the land of milk and honey. Their faithlessness disqualified them from entering in.

Manna was a form of the food that perishes. It had the power to sustain the people of Israel, so that their bodies were healthy and they could continue to advance towards their goal. But because it was merely food, even the manna from heaven did not have the power to redeem. That is, the manna itself had no impact whatsoever on the soul of the person who consumed it.

Jesus contrasts the manna from the wilderness with the true bread from heaven which the Father gives to the world. He tells the five thousand who had eaten the loaves and fishes, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." Whereas those who ate the manna in the wilderness were hungry the next day for more manna and then they eventually died, those who consume the bread of life will not hunger and will have eternal life. Holy Communion, receiving our Lord's Body and Blood, has a redemptive power that the manna from heaven did not possess. Thus, we are to labor for the Blessed Sacrament, for this is food that wells up to eternal life.

The redemptive power of Holy Communion is what makes the Sacrament the true bread from heaven. For all the manna that the Israelites ate, it could not make them better people. And for all the horrible sins they committed as they passed to the Promised Land, the manna they ate could not take away their sins and gain them entry into paradise. Holy Communion communicates both the forgiveness of our sin and the grace we require to grow in holiness, which makes it possible for us to consume the Lord's Body and Blood to actually get to heaven.

Receiving Holy Communion should not be seen, however, as punching one's ticket to heaven, as if it were our automatic means to paradise. Jesus makes clear in the Gospel that our reception of His Body and Blood must be paired with faith in Him. He says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in

him whom he has sent.” Therefore, the elements of Holy Communion, the Host and the Precious Blood, are not to be seen as magical talismans that work for good no matter what we do. Instead, they are the gifts we receive after we have professed faith in our Lord. Indeed, they are a sign that we believe what He says about Himself. Faith comes first. Then we receive.

This order of the sacraments, as it is articulated in the Gospel today, is what is reflected in the ancient practice of the Church. Before one is admitted to Holy Communion, full union with God in Jesus Christ, he must first confess that he believes all that the Church teaches. This confession of faith happens within the context of baptism, and only after the penitent has been baptized is he admitted to the Sacrament of Our Lord’s Body and Blood.

Remember that the people who didn’t believe what Jesus said about Himself never received Holy Communion. When Jesus told them what we heard today, that He is the Bread of Life, they were offended. They said it was a hard teaching, and they no longer followed Him. More intent to labor for the food that perishes, they refused the Bread of Life, and they walked away. They were not baptized; they were not communed.

In the same way that Jesus did not administer His Body and Blood to those who have not professed their faith in Him, so His Body the Church does not give Holy Communion to those who have not been baptized. Faithlessness excluded the people of Israel from the Promised Land, which is a prefigurement for us. Unless we have faith in the Lord Jesus and everything he says about Himself, we cannot expect to enter our eternal home in heaven. Faith does not make Holy Communion our Lord’s Body and Blood. Rather, faith is a prerequisite for the Lord’s Body and Blood to benefit us. Holy Communion does us no good, and in fact may well hurt us, unless we believe in Him on whom God the Father has set His seal. If we don’t believe that Jesus is the Bread of Life, it makes no sense to desire or labor for that Bread.

Even so, we who do labor for the Bread of Life should not seek it merely to ensure our salvation. Remember that the manna from heaven was given to the Israelites so that they could be sustained in their mission as the Lord’s chosen people. They were to proclaim God’s law and His mercies to all the nations. Those who did not enter the Promised Land were excluded precisely because they rejected that mission and preferred the security that they knew as slaves. They did not want to live by faith or for others, but for themselves.

We should keep those excluded Israelites in mind as we approach the altar rail to receive the Bread of Life. Yes, we want to live, but we must recognize that we have been given the Bread of Life in order to be able to fulfill a mission. Our destiny is not to fall back into slavery to sin, but to share with others the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. And one of the first things that Holy Communion gives us the strength to assure our neighbors is that the Lord can be trusted. What Jesus says about Himself is true; and if our neighbors will only confess what we now believe, they can also have what we now possess. Once we know we’ve been included, we ought to do all we can to make sure our neighbors, like those who walked away from Jesus, don’t exclude themselves.