

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Lent IV

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

First Lesson: Exodus 16:4-15

“Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no. And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily. And Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel, At even, then ye shall know that the Lord hath brought you out from the land of Egypt: And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the Lord; for that he heareth your murmurings against the Lord: and what are we, that ye murmur against us? And Moses said, This shall be, when the Lord shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord.

“And Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the Lord: for he hath heard your murmurings. And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God. And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host. And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not

what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.”

Second Lesson: John 6:27-40

“... Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed. Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not. All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Text:

“The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” St. John 6:33 (RSV).

Body:

As human beings we do not have life in ourselves. Only God has life in Himself. We are importers of life. It comes to us from outside of ourselves. We have the ability to receive life and to pass it on, but we do not have the ability to generate life within ourselves. Whatever life we have or shall ever have is given to us by God.

When we look deep inside ourselves, into the core of our being, what we find is the opposite of life. “There is no health in us,” as we say in our prayer of confession. So Jesus says in Matthew’s gospel, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man but what comes out of the mouth. For what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man.”

This aspect of our human condition is a source of great anxiety for us. We try to deny it. We try to hide from it. We try to disguise it. But there is one thing that constantly reminds of that we are importers of life, and that is the fact that we get hungry.

God never gets hungry. God never gets thirsty. God has life in himself. But we have to eat and we have to drink. We have to take life into ourselves. And so our Lord teaches us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

In the Old Testament Lesson, God quite literally does that. The manna comes down from heaven every day and keeps the Israelites alive. But there is more to this petition in the Lord’s Prayer than physical nourishment.

Jesus says, “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they are now dead. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread he shall live

forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

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Jesus is saying here that there is spiritual food as well as physical food, just as there is spiritual life as well as physical life. God provides us with both. He feeds our souls as well as our bodies on a daily basis, if we will accept what he provides.

The lectionary places this passage in the context of Morning Prayer, but it is most vividly expounded when we come to the altar and extend our hands or open our mouths and the priest places bread in them and says “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.”

There are no sacraments in heaven because spiritual reality is directly experienced there. It is not mediated through physical reality as it is here. The mediation of the spiritual through the physical is what defines a sacrament. But even in heaven we continue to be dependent on God to give us life. We have no other source. There is no other source. What we find when we look within ourselves is death. But the Bread of Life has come down from heaven to give us life, and He continues to give us life when he takes us up to heaven with Him.

Jesus says again, “It was not Moses who gave you that manna from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he that came down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

Christ comes down from heaven every time we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, and when he comes he gives life to all who receive it.

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