

Homily for Sunday, August 2, 2009

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, B

*Ex 16:2-4, 12-15; Ps 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54; Eph 4:17, 20-24; Jn 6:24-35*

It is said that, “Truth is stranger than fiction.” We live in a world that can indeed seem pretty strange. It is a place where millions die of starvation and malnutrition every year while millions of others die of heart disease, diabetes and the effects of eating *too much* of the wrong things. Most food experts tell us that the problem is not that we don’t have enough food in the world to provide everyone with an adequate diet but rather that it is poorly distributed and used to make things that are not only unnecessary but, especially in excess, are bad for us.

Bread and rice are staple foods. Twinkies® and 16 ounce steaks are not. Water is essential for life. Coca Cola® is not. Multiple servings of fruits and veggies are part of a well-balanced diet. Multiple servings of potato chips and Apple Jacks® are not.

Do the injustices in our global food and water systems demand that we become guilt-ridden and puritanical doyennes of all that we eat and drink, scolding ourselves and others and forever denying ourselves the things we enjoy? No. However, they do call us to a different level of consciousness in our relationships with our brothers and sisters throughout the world. They also challenge us to examine how our choices may build up or distort those relationships. Perhaps they may even call us to rediscover the virtue of temperance.

They also invite us to take another look at our hungers. That’s what Jesus invites us to do in today’s gospel reading. Faced with growing crowds of people who were following him because they saw or had heard of the signs he was performing—most recently the miracle of the loaves we heard about last week (John 6:1-15)—Jesus cautioned them, “Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.” Just what kind of food are we working for? What are our hungers and thirsts? What are our priorities in life?

One of the quickest ways to determine a person’s or group’s priorities is to see how they spend their money. If a person spends the vast majority of their income on food, clothing and shelter, we can pretty much conclude that their priorities are providing for their basic needs. If a person spends half of their paycheck at the tavern or casino, we will draw a different conclusion. What would you call a nation in which the government spends more on the military than on educating its children,

teens and young adults or one in which its citizens spend more on pornography than its government does on Head Start? The USA.

Such is the work of human beings. The work of God is different. Our gospel reading reminds us that the work of God is to “believe in the one he sent.” In saying that to those who came to him, Jesus was in a sense following in the footsteps of Moses. Just as the people of ancient Israel were called to believe in and listen to Moses as their leader and God’s representative on earth, so their descendants were being asked to believe in and listen to God’s own Word made flesh.

The belief of the people of Israel was tested on their Exodus journey, when they had to contend at various times with hunger, thirst, and just plain confusion. At times they were tempted to go back to the slavery they knew or to create gods whom they thought could help them. In today’s passage from Exodus, God responded to their hungers by providing them with food that in reality was already around them.

Manna (from the Hebrew *Man hu?*, “What is this?”) is a flaky, bread-like substance produced by the secretions of insects. Quail returning from their spring migrations to Europe would regularly stop in the deserts of the ancient Sinai to rest. Both manna and quail, then, were and even today are naturally occurring food. Perhaps the greatest miracle in this story is that the people actually paid attention to what God was already providing for them!

We face similar tests in our own journeys of faith, especially when we don’t have everything we think we need or want and we aren’t sure where things are going. At those times, we too are challenged to take a second look around us; and often we realize that the solutions we seek are already around us and within us. We just have to stop, pay attention, and believe!

That belief is made real when we, as Paul urged the early church at Ephesus: (1) put away our old selves and former ways of life; (2) are “renewed in the spirit” of our minds; and (3) “put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth.” In other words, our faith in God is made real in our own conversion.

Our world is hungry for change, for transformation. That hunger cannot be satisfied by any nation or ideology, any product or fad, even any particular religious institution. It can only be satisfied by the bread of life—working around us, working for us, and especially working within us. As we also receive that bread of life in the Eucharist, may we also grow in our commitment to share it with others who are hungry. +