

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

Fr. Samuel Springuel

04 August, 2024

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** Exodus 16:2–4,12–15

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 78:3–4,23–24,25,54

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** Ephesians 4:17,20–24

**Gospel** John 6:24–35

I have never really been hungry. I don't mean the "I haven't eaten since breakfast and it's time for dinner" kind of hungry, but the "I can only afford 1 small meal per day" or the "I haven't eaten in several days due to the lack of food" kind of hungry. The closest I get to that kind of hunger is reading about it. One book that I read recently which touches on hunger is *Scarcity* by Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir. In that book the authors describe how the lack of an essential resource, including, but not limited to, food, leads to changes in how we think. We become obsessed with the thing we lack, with our thinking regularly, and quite involuntarily, returning to that thing. Our decision making becomes biased towards choices with short term benefits: either preventing the scarcity we are experiencing from getting worse or providing some immediate relief. Further, this bias, a form of tunnel vision, becomes so strong that even if the short term benefit is out weighed by a long term cost, we will still take the short term benefit because we simply will not see the long term cost or if we do, will treat it as if it was happening to someone else: future me.

So, when the reading from Exodus says the Israelites complained about the lack of food, I have to wonder: what exactly is the Israelites fault in this situation? Earlier, the Book of Exodus specifically says that the Israelites were unable to prepare food for the journey. All they took with them was their flocks and the bread they could quickly bake from unleavened dough. This hardly constitutes enough food for an extended journey and thus, here they are, one month after having left Egypt, running out of food. It is not surprising under those circumstances that their minds should become hyper focused on food and their memories of the relative plenty they had in Egypt. Surely God should have foreseen this and prepared for it. He instructed the Israelites (through Moses) to ask their neighbors for gold, silver, and articles of clothing in preparation for their departure and also gave them detailed instructions for preparing the Passover meal which included obtaining the lamb that would become the

centerpiece of the meal 4 days in advance. Surely those instructions could have included something about laying up food for a journey. Or the stop they made at the oasis of Elim where there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees. Surely that oasis could have brought forth an abundance of food with which to stock the Israelite's bags. Heck, God could have even had the Israelites run into some merchant caravan in the wilderness with whom they could trade some of the gold, silver, and fine clothing they had taken from the Egyptians for food to fill their bags.

And yet this is not how the journey in the wilderness begins. Instead we get a disorganized mess in which people flee, taking with them their sources of wealth, gold, silver, fine clothes, flocks, but not the essentials that they really need: sufficient food and water. Indeed, when I put it that way, the Israelites must have looked like the images we see all too often in the news of people fleeing from conflicts or disasters: loaded high with anything and everything they could carry themselves or on their animals or with a cart. Taking with them as much of their lives as they could transport, knowing they would never return to what they had before. So under these circumstances, what did the Israelites do wrong?

It's easy for us to say that they didn't trust in the Lord; didn't have faith that God would provide for them because they were following his instructions. The circumstances might have been difficult, but God was with them, or rather they were with God, and thus everything would come out alright in the end. But this is exactly the kind of long term thinking that research has shown that people experiencing scarcity *cannot* engage in. Our brains are simply not wired to take the long view when things are dire. They are too focused on immediate survival. God certainly knows this; he made us this way. So what does he find fault with when the Israelites act in what could be described as an entirely predictable fashion?

As I struggled with this, I read and reread not just today's reading, but the chapters surrounding it in the Book of Exodus and eventually arrived at a startling conclusion: God doesn't blame the Israelites for their grumbling. He hears them and gives them an answer, a solution, in the form of the quail and the manna, but he doesn't condemn or punish them for it. Surely, like me, you must be thinking "that can't be right." I distinctly remember God visiting a punishment on the Israelites for their complaints about food, but try as I might, I could not find it in Exodus. Instead, I found it in the Book of Numbers and the event takes place after the Israelites have left Sinai, a full year after the events described in today's reading take place. In other words, the complaining that gets the Israelites into trouble is not scarcity driven. They've been eating the quail and the manna for a full year and are complaining not about a lack of food, of God *not* providing for them, but rather about the lack of variety, the fact that God is not providing for them *in the way they want*.

It is in this distinction that I see the precursor of today's Gospel. Jesus had just fed 5,000 people with five barely loaves and two fish and yet when instructed to believe in the one God had sent, these people, the same people who had just eaten of the five loaves and two fish, had the temerity to ask for a sign that

Jesus was that one. The multiplication of the loaves and the fish apparently didn't count; it wasn't the kind of sign they were looking for. They were like their ancestors after Sinai: if God didn't act the way they wanted him to, then it wasn't good enough. They "knew" how things were "supposed" to be and if God, Jesus, wasn't willing to act in the way that they expected, then they were going to ignore him.

But that isn't the connection that the lectionary is drawing for us today. As I said, the complaining that the Israelites get punished for is their rejection of the manna in the Book of Numbers, not today's reading from Exodus when the manna is first given. The lectionary, therefore, is trying to draw our attention to something else; not the grumbling, or at least not the grumbling as a reason for punishment. The first reading is about how God acknowledges the needs of his people, even when expressed inarticulately as grumbling, and gives them what they need. Jesus too is looking at what these people need. By feeding them with the bread and the fish, Jesus has broken the tunnel vision that the scarcity of hunger would have imposed on the multitude. He has enabled them to think long term again and to discern what it is that really matters. And *then* he offers them the bread from heaven, his very body, as the bread of life that will satisfy not their physical hunger, but the deepest yearnings of their soul.

In the coming weeks we will hear how the people reacted to that offer, but for now let us simply dwell on it. For that offer is made not just to those people in that time and place, but to us as well. Jesus places before us his very body in the Eucharist, offering us the one thing that will satisfy the hunger, not of our stomach, but of our very being.