

18th Sunday of the Year (Cycle A)

(Isa 55:1-3; Rom 8:35, 37-39; Matt 14:13-21)

Why does the Bible speak so much about food? Reminds me of the man who says to his son, “Come here, Son, I’ll tell about the facts of life.” To which he replies, “Dad, you’ve already told me about the facts of life 16 times.” To which the father, “Ah, yes! But they till fascinate me.” Food is fascinating, as attested by the popularity of TV programs on cooking. It may have started with Julia Childs, but now we have a “Food Network” and a “Cooking Channel.” I suspect that many of the viewers simply find it interesting; they never lit a flame under a skillet, and don’t plan to.

I’m not suggesting that the Bible speaks about food because of fascination. To begin with, food is not a luxury; it’s a necessity—much too important to be thought of in terms of mere fascination. And in the Bible the reference to food frequently involves something beyond mere nourishment. Think about it. The forbidden fruit, the Paschal Lamb, the Manna in the wilderness, the multiplication of the loaves, the Last Supper, the parables of the Wedding Banquet are only a few examples.

And so in today’s first reading, the gracious invitation from the Lord to come and eat without charge implies far more than food. The prophet is speaking to the Israelites exiled in the Babylonian captivity. He is promising them release, return. In today’s reading the grain, wine, and milk are symbolic of all the things God

wants to give them. These terms are heaped up, along with others: “eat well”; “delight in rich fare.” This is beyond normal food which, it says, “fails to satisfy.” It is clear that God’s concern goes far beyond food: He can give us so much more, but it is a matter of fully understanding, fully accepting His invitation: “Come [he says]... heed me... come to me heedfully ... listen.” So much more than food is involved: “listen, that you may have life.” To eat sustains life, but something beyond life of the body is meant here; when God promises life, it is so much more than bodily life. This is a call to a royal banquet and an invitation to enter into the joy of God’s new order: we see this in the promise to renew the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David. God’s promises to David and to his line are the source of our hope for a Messiah and all the good things that come with the new order he brings in.. All this is involved in the promise “to renew ... the benefits assured to David.” The text therefore looks forward to the messianic order—all this is here presented as the invitation to a banquet.

All this, in turn, has relevance to the gospel story of the feeding of the 5,000+. This scene is reminiscent of Israel in the desert; Jesus’ hearers are in what is said to be a deserted place. The apostles, being practical, remind Jesus of the lateness of the hour, the distance from any eating places. Jesus teases them with the suggestion that THEY feed the crowds; they know they can’t but He knows He can. This is more like Israel being fed with manna in the desert than of messianic banquet. But it does have

messianic overtones. Among some Jews there was the belief that in the last times the manna would again descend from heaven. In fact in John's gospel, on the occasion of this same miracle, Jesus had to flee because the people wanted to seize Him and make Him king. The manna itself was considered somewhat miraculous. The psalm refers to it as "bread from heaven," and as "the food of angels."

And it is also an anticipation, a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. In John's gospel it is here that Jesus presents his discourse on the Bread of Life, that is, His extended teaching on the Eucharist. He identifies the manna as a type of the Eucharist when He says, "I am the living bread come down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." This is the Bread we partake of when we approach the altar. The OT referred to the manna in poetic terms as the "bread of angels," but as applied to the Eucharist, it would be a wildly inaccurate characterization. We, as Christians, approach Holy Communion to receive it into our very beings—something no angel could ever do. We are already related to Jesus because we share His flesh and blood through Mary and the Incarnation in a way no angel does. Because we already share His human nature, we can also be sharers of His divine nature in a way no angel could.

With so close a union with Christ, we can perhaps understand better Paul's conviction (second reading) that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He enumerates a whole series of things, some of which could, perhaps do, befall us at times: for example, "anguish,

distress”; some less likely but still possible: for example, “famine,” and let’s substitute “homelessness” for “nakedness”; some seem most unlikely, though they were the experience of many Christians in Paul’s day: for example, “persecution, the sword.” And Paul goes on to a second enumeration, including not only life and death but also angels and principalities (i.e., an order of angels) and “and any other creature.” So cemented are we to the “love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” that none of these things can pry us apart. This is because of the power of grace within us.

There is, alas, one thing that can accomplish this separation, and that is sin. How foolish we would be to allow sin to bring about what neither the sword nor angelic powers could accomplish. As we approach the altar today, we remember that Jesus feeds us not with ordinary bread, as He did the 5,000 of today’s gospel, but with the bread from heaven, His own Body and Blood. We must certainly be resolved that sin will not accomplish within us what no other power in heaven or on earth can do. And let us approach, as always, with hearts full of love and thanksgiving.