

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

4 August 2024



Collect

Draw near to your servants, O Lord,
and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness,
that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide,
you may restore what you have created
and keep safe what you have restored.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

On their journey through the desert, Moses is instructed to tell the people “to go out and gather the day’s portion” of the manna. Whether they gathered more or less of the manna, each one found they had collected just the right amount. But those who tried to keep some for the following day discovered that it spoiled overnight (Ex 16:17-20). In the one prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, we ask God to give us “our daily bread.” No-one knows for sure what the unusual Greek word translated as “daily” really means, but the petition brings to mind the injunction about the manna. We are to pray for just what we need today, no more and no less. We are to be like Paul who learnt to manage on what he had, whether he was poor or rich (Phil 4:11-12), and not like the rich man who built bigger barns to store his wealth (Lk 12:13-21). Jesus taught us to set our hearts on God’s reign and righteousness, and all else would be given us besides (Mt 6:33). Not an easy task in a compulsively acquisitive society.

A reading from the book of Exodus 16:2–4, 12–15

The whole community of the sons of Israel began to complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and said to them, 'Why did we not die at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content! As it is, you have brought us to this wilderness to starve this whole company to death!'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Now I will rain down bread for you from the heavens. Each day the people are to go out and gather the day's portion; I propose to test them in this way to see whether they will follow my law or not.'

'I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel. Say this to them, "Between the two evenings you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have bread to your heart's content. Then you will learn that I, the Lord, am your God.'" And so it came about: quails flew up in the evening, and they covered the camp; in the morning there was a coating of dew all round the camp. When the coating of dew lifted, there on the surface of the desert was a thing delicate, powdery, as fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When they saw this, the sons of Israel said to one another, 'What is that?' not knowing what it was. 'That' said Moses to them 'is the bread the Lord gives you to eat.'

First Reading

The challenges of the present are prone to make us nostalgic for a past remembered as more congenial. Whether or not this is always true of human beings, it certainly was the case with the Hebrews newly liberated from Egypt. The hardships of their desert journey provoked them to complain bitterly against their leaders, Moses and Aaron, and thus against the God who had appointed them.

As we have the story today, God provides promptly and generously in response to the people's complaints. The gift of bread is mysterious, and no amount of speculation can determine exactly what it is. In fact, the question the people ask, "What is that?", has given the heavenly gift its name "manna." There is a condition attached. God puts everyone to the test by insisting that each person gather no more than what they need each day. In verses we don't hear, those who tried to store some up for the next day found it spoiled.

This desert drama is well captured in the reading. It weaves together action and the voices of the people, the Lord and Moses into a dynamic whole. Readers have the opportunity to distinguish the different voices, ranging as they do from angry complaint to solemn decree. It's an engaging story whose conclusion forges a link with the gospel of the day.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 77:3–4, 23–25, 54

R. The Lord gave them bread from heaven.

The things we have heard and understood,
the things our fathers have told us,
we will tell to the next generation:
the glories of the Lord and his might. **R.**

He commanded the clouds above
and opened the gates of heaven.
He rained down manna for their food,
and gave them bread from heaven. **R.**

Mere men ate the bread of angels.
He sent them abundance of food.
He brought them to his holy land,
to the mountain which his right hand had won. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The poetic prayers that are the psalms take many different forms. Psalm 77/78 is a lengthy recital of Israel's history from the exodus down to David. It has a didactic purpose that the psalmist makes clear in the first section. His aim is to teach succeeding generations of their duty to remember God's saving actions and remain faithful. He identifies a recurring pattern in Israel's history: God acts on the people's behalf, they rebel, they suffer the consequences, God forgives and restores.

The first stanza of the responsorial psalm spells out the psalmist's desire, that each generation will pass on to the next the story of what their mighty and glorious God has done. The following two, anticipated by the response, recall God's gift of manna. They sum up what we heard in the reading from Exodus. All this is very positive, but somewhat misleading, in that the psalm goes on to speak of God's anger at Israel's ingratitude and the punishment God inflicts on them.

As it stands, however, the responsorial psalm is an encouraging invitation to testify to God's providential care in supplying the Israelites with abundant food for their journey. While it is not in the form of a prayer as such, being more a series of statements, it deserves to be proclaimed in a spirit of faith.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Ephesians**

4:17, 20–24

I want to urge you in the name of the Lord, not to go on living the aimless kind of life that pagans live. Now that is hardly the way you have learnt from Christ, unless you failed to hear him properly when you were taught what the truth is in Jesus. You must give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to John**

6:24–35

When the people saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into boats and crossed to Capernaum to look for Jesus. When they found him on the other side, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus answered:

'I tell you most solemnly,
you are not looking for me
because you have seen the signs
but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat.
Do not work for food that cannot last,
but work for food that endures to eternal life,
the kind of food the Son of Man is offering you,
for on him the Father, God himself, has set his seal.'

Then they said to him, 'What must we do if we are to do the works that God wants?' Jesus gave them this answer, 'This is working for God: you must believe in the one he has sent.' So they said, 'What sign will you give to show us that we should believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers had manna to eat in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'

Jesus answered:

'I tell you solemnly,
it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven,
it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven,
the true bread;
for the bread of God
is that which comes down from heaven
and gives life to the world.'

'Sir,' they said 'give us that bread always.'

Jesus answered:

'I am the bread of life.
He who comes to me will never be hungry;
he who believes in me will never thirst.'

Second Reading

In contrast to last week's reading which was wholly affirmative, today's begins in negative mode. Somewhat oddly in a letter addressed to Gentiles who had embraced Christ, the author insists on the aimlessness of pagan life. He seems to write as if they hadn't yet changed their ways. Perhaps he was fearful they would lapse into old habits.

His call to them to put aside their old self and put on the new seems based on the baptismal ritual of shedding one's customary clothes and donning the white robe of the newly baptised. This was no mere outward gesture but one that was symbolic of the "spiritual revolution" that made one a new creation "in God's way." In the same vein, Paul made this appeal in his letter to the Philippians: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus" (2:5). And in his letter to the Romans, he urges them to "let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind" (12:2).

While this reading may begin somewhat in shadow, it emerges finally into the full light of day. The author rounds out his appeal with an attractive reference to "the goodness and holiness of the truth." This is what should lodge in the minds and hearts of the assembly.

Gospel

John separates the miraculous feeding of the crowd from the ensuing dialogue by inserting an account of the disciples' crossing the lake. A storm blows up and they become frightened, but Jesus walks to them on the water and they arrive safely at Capernaum. The lectionary omits this episode and takes us straight into the exchanges between Jesus and the crowd.

The dialogue proceeds via a series of misunderstandings on the part of the crowd. First, they ask how Jesus got to Capernaum, then what works they must do for God, and then what sign Jesus will give them. Finally in this part of the chapter, they ask Jesus for the bread he's been talking about. Each question betrays their limited comprehension of Jesus' teaching and identity.

Step by step, Jesus responds in a way that offers them the opportunity to grasp the truth. He is offering them food for eternal life, the work they must do is believe, the Father gives them true life-giving bread, and Jesus himself is the bread of life. By refusing to take their questions at face value, Jesus questions their assumptions and challenges them to adopt a wholly new mindset. Their reliance on tradition, in this case that of Moses and the manna, deprives them of the freedom to see who Jesus really is – the Son of Man on whom the Father has set his seal.

Like the reading from Exodus, the gospel combines narrative and dialogue to give the story momentum. Being relatively long and well-known, it requires the minister of the gospel to take extra care to proclaim it with energy and assurance.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Exodus 16:2–4, 12–15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "if only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another; "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 4:17, 20–24

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John 6:24–35

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were at the place where Jesus had given the bread, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him,
 "Rabbi, when did you come here?"
 Jesus answered them,
 "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me,
 not because you saw signs,
 but because you ate your fill of the loaves.
 Do not work for the food that perishes,
 but for the food that endures for eternal life,
 which the Son of Man will give you.
 For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."
 Then they said to Jesus,
 "What must we do to perform the works of God?"
 Jesus answered them,
 "This is the work of God,
 that you believe in him whom he has sent."
 So they said to him,
 "What sign are you going to give us then,
 so that we may see it and believe you?
 What work are you performing?
 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness;
 as it is written,
 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"
 Then Jesus said to them,
 "Very truly, I tell you,
 it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven,
 but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.
 For the bread of God
 is that which comes down
 from heaven and gives life to the world."
 They said to him,
 "Sir, give us this bread always."
 Jesus said to them,
 "I am the bread of life.
 Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
 and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time V)

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us
 and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,
 that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.

Amen.

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,
 and be found ever hastening along
 in the path of God's commands,
 made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
 the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
 come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time V, Roman Missal p. 716)