

COMMENTARY

“Manna?”

By Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

Manna sounds like a pretty nice treat, doesn't it? Some parts of Scripture make it appear like a near relative to milk and honey. Surprisingly, it got its name because when the Israelites first discovered it on the desert floor they said something like, “Manna?” which we would translate into English as “What is this?” Although nobody recorded their tone of voice, we can safely assume that it didn't echo a woman who just discovered a diamond bracelet in her birthday card. They had been complaining that Moses had freed them only to lead them to a slow death in the desert. From that vantage point, aging out as slaves in Egypt looked like a better but lost opportunity.

In response to their complaints, God instructed them to collect what they called “Manna?” Moses explained that it was the bread the Lord had given them to eat. Something like an ancient version of instant breakfast, it was a 100 percent natural substance left by insects who had extracted juice from a particular fruit. People could gather and eat the pellets or flakes and even bake them into a kind of bread. This “bread from heaven” seems to belong to the category of foods that the less you know about their provenance the more you can enjoy them. The manna kept the Israelites going. It gave them nourishment but more importantly, it served as a sign of God's constant care for them. With the manna, they were able to continue the journey toward becoming the chosen people in the land God wanted to give them. Strange as the manna first appeared, its story evolved into a classic and cherished legend about God's providence, including the warning that it would decay if anyone tried to hoard it.

The people ate that bread day after day until they arrived in the promised land. In the process, they grew in gratitude for what it meant as much as they appreciated how it arrived and how it tasted. They came to realize that the manna and the quail were not just food, but signs, what we call sacraments of God's care for them. The more they acknowledged that, the more their eating became a communion, a way of receiving and taking in God's love. Eating that bread would transform them.

Because it's always easier to appreciate miracles and grace in hindsight, the people of Jesus' day loved their thousand-year-old memory of the manna and shared the hope that it would happen again in the time of the Messiah. (See *Jesus and the Last Supper* by Brian Pitre.) That's where Jesus tried to help them delve deeper into their religious imagination; he wanted to help them understand the truly human meaning of what he called the bread of life. If they desired to participate in the experience of their ancestors, they would have to learn not only to look at the past or hope for the future, but to see what was right in front of them. Jesus said, “It was not Moses who *gave* the bread from heaven, my Father *gives* you the true bread from heaven” [italics added].

While it was easy for them to remember the bread of heaven, the manna they thought had appeared miraculously for their ancestors, they had forgotten that the great sharing of bread that

motivated their search for Jesus began with a child who gave everything he had for Jesus to share with the crowd.

One of the key challenges John's Gospel gives us is the call to recognize the gifts of God in our midst. The people who meet Jesus in this Gospel are always looking for great things and seem unable to realize that the marvels they seek are right in front of them. They need only believe in order to perceive them.

Perhaps we might take today's readings as an invitation to look at the stuff of our daily lives, the ordinary, the surprising and even that which originally appears less than attractive, and to ask "What is this?" Following the lead of our ancestors in the faith, we may slowly learn to see beyond what the Letter to the Ephesians calls the "futility" of our minds and begin to perceive what God is doing here and now.

The Gospel tells us that God is constantly in the process of giving life to the world. Like the Israelites, we are invited to keep moving on our journey of faith. We are called to go along together, seeking and praying, looking at the reality of our world and asking "What is this?" Sincerely asking that question in community will lead us to discover the manna God keeps sending. When we share it, we discover that it is the only bread that satisfies the hungers of our world.

Ex 16:2-4, 12-15

God's response to the grumbling people in the desert provided a model for the Christian Scripture stories of Jesus' miraculous sharing of food among crowds of thousands. We heard John's version of that event in last week's Gospel. This story from Exodus has all the depth and levels of meaning that we might find in a story from John's Gospel.

The scene opens with the whole "community" grumbling against Moses and Aaron. Saying that the people were a community subtly underlines the fact that until Moses and God got involved with them, they were not a community at all; they were just slaves in Egypt. God sent Moses to lead them into becoming a community who could live in the freedom of God's chosen ones. Their protest was therefore much more than a question of rations. They were effectively questioning the whole Exodus enterprise, including the possibility that they could be a people of God. They were not simply mistrusting Moses, but the very God who had called them into being as a people on the road to freedom.

God's response to their complaints begins with a quote from their recent past: "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites" (Exodus 16:12). People well versed in the Exodus story immediately hear that as an echo of how it all began. Exodus 2 tells us that when "the Israelites groaned under their bondage ... their cry for help went up to God" and that God told Moses, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people ... and have heard their cry." The God of Exodus is the God who hears the cry of suffering people and does something about it.

But God is not a nanny who jumps at every whimper. God promised to sustain the people, but that sustenance would test their faith as well. God promised them their daily bread, the manna, and told them to trust that it would be there. They were to gather it one day at a time, believing that it would be there on the next day as well.

The Lectionary skips the details of God's instructions that the people were to gather only enough for the day and that whether they gathered much or little, each family had just what they needed. On the sixth day, they were to gather for the Sabbath as well, but if on any other day they had left-overs, the food decayed before they could use it. That was God's way of teaching them that hoarding only feeds the worms.

The food God provided came from very natural phenomena. A certain kind of lice puncture the fruit of a particular tree and drink the sweet juice, eventually leaving a substance that flows and congeals and then can be eaten raw or cooked such that it resembles bread. The desert's *carte du jour* was such a surprise to the Israelites that the word *manna* comes from the question, "What is this?" "Manna?" became shorthand for the bread God gave them, bread they would eventually call bread from heaven.

One of the things we should remember from this story is that creation is the first and most ordinary expression of God's providence. We don't have to seek out "miracles." God's plan has been sufficient from the start, if only we do not truncate it.

Ps 78: 3-4, 23-24, 25, 54

Today's selection from the second-longest psalm in the Psalter emphasizes the good God did for the people as they wandered in the desert. Tying together the first reading and the Gospel, it begins with the people promising that they will pass the stories from one generation to the next so that generations to come would always remember the wonders God had done for them.

Like any people whose awareness of God's love overrides their preoccupation with scientific fundamentalism, they sing that God commanded the skies to rain down food for the hungry people. Even though what they found was the mysterious "Manna?" they understood it as a miracle of divine providence. Our final verse reminds us that the people came to appreciate that product so much that they considered it the food of angels. Praying this psalm prepares us for today's selections from Ephesians and the Gospel which call us to see realities that are deeper than the intellect alone can grasp.

Eph 4:17, 20-24

Today's selection from the Letter to the Ephesians complements Jesus' Gospel call to go beyond the superficial and grasp the deepest possibilities of human life. The author assumes that the audience once lived "as the Gentiles do," caught up in "the futility of their minds" and "deceitful desires," but that they have also experienced a more satisfying alternative.

While this is a fairly typical style of moral preaching for the first century, it is more applicable to our day than we might think at first blush. The author contrasts futile intellectualism to having "learned Christ." The first part of this reading is a warning against getting caught up in the trivial concerns that society promotes or the pseudo-sophistication of those who denigrate faith as the refuge of the intellectually or emotionally weak. We can hear that as a critique of consumerism and fundamentalist science that makes a dogma of atheism.

Pope Francis broaches these ideas in paragraph 79 of *Evangelii Gaudium* ("Joy of the Gospel"). He says, "At times our media culture and some intellectual circles convey a marked skepticism with regard to the Church's message, along with a certain cynicism." He goes on to indicate that such arrogant erudition can make the faithful feel an "inferiority complex which leads them to

relativize or conceal their Christian identity and convictions.” Francis is pointing out that, to those who do not understand it, the simplicity and directness of the Christian message can mask its truth and intensity. Like the people in today’s Gospel, those who believe only in science cannot comprehend the transformative power of the gift of a few loaves and fishes.

The Letter to the Ephesians goes on to remind the community of what they have learned. The unique phrase “you learned Christ” is just odd enough to make people think twice. The phrase has nothing to do with intellectual knowledge or dogmatic assertions. Learning Christ appears to be a way of living in relationship to the risen Lord, a way of orienting one’s entire life to the process of coming to know Christ and allowing Christ to gradually become the meaning and central motivating factor of one’s life.

The author wants the community to be acutely aware of the difference that Christ does or could bring about in their lives. Using ideas also found in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (3:27), this author speaks about the old and new orientations to life as like a self that one puts on, or we might say, the person one decides to be. In the end, the selection from Ephesians is a call to become conscious of whether it is Christ or contemporary culture that orients our daily activity.

Jn 6:24-35

Typical of John’s Gospel, when the people asked Jesus a question, he responded to what they were really thinking but not saying (John 2:25). As Spanish theologian Juan Mateos explains in *El Evangelio de Juan*, these people who had sought and found Jesus “had been the beneficiaries of the love of God expressed through Jesus and ... a child, but they only remember the satisfaction of their hunger.” The child had given them an example of unstinting generosity and they came looking for Jesus, seeking food and oblivious to the signs.

Jesus’ invitation that they work for the food that endures for eternal life apparently got through to them because they moved from seeking Jesus as the source of bread to asking how they could do the works of God. With that, we get a Johannine twist. Jesus dropped their plural noun “works” to offer them a singular focus. He wasn’t teaching about laws or cultic practices or even the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Instead, as he had when he gave them the bread, Jesus was inviting them into communion of being with himself and the Father. If they wanted to do the work of God, the only requirement was to accept what God was doing in their midst. Jesus was doing God’s own work on their behalf. All they needed to do was believe in the one God sent them (John 3:16).

In response, the crowd fell back into their desire for incontrovertible proof and asked for a sign like their fathers had seen. As good Jews, they cherished the fact that they stood in continuity with their ancestors. They identified with the slaves who allowed Moses to lead them out of Egypt; they were proud descendants of the people first nourished by God’s manna. Jesus challenged them to take those memories to a deeper level, not only to remember what God did for their legendary ancestors, but to see God’s action in the present. Instead of speaking of Moses, their fathers and historical miracles, Jesus challenged them to recognize his Father’s offer of true life to them in the present.

We might imagine Jesus and the people in this scene as involved in a delicate dance. The people are poised between faith in God’s presence to them in the moment and the agnosticism of believing in the past and future, while discounting the potential and power of the present. If only

their ancestors could have told them about naming that miraculous bread and how long it took before “Manna?” became a word that made them think of blessing rather than desperation.

The people who sought Jesus out seemed to have forgotten that the bread they had shared the day before came as a donation from a child who gave Jesus five loaves and two fish. On one hand it was very little, on the other it was everything he had. That was what allowed it to become the bread of life.

We share the challenge faced by the people who sought Jesus after eating the bread that nourished the multitude. Jesus offered his people the bread of life, but like their ancestors, they kept focusing on “Manna?” Looking so hard for miracles, they missed what was right before their eyes.

God’s providence is all-around us. We don’t have to look far to find reflections of the child who gave everything he had so that Jesus could share it with the hungry. How often do we remain oblivious to simple signs of the reign of God in our midst while pining for miracles and saints whose holiness shines irrefutably in the public square? The work God gives us is to realize that our eyes can perceive God’s presence in simple ways. Faith has no need of miraculous coercion.
