

REFLECTION FOR TUESDAY THIRD WEEK OF EASTER

John 6:30-35

It smelled awful. It looked like little cross sections of a bleached garden hose. And when I began to chew it, it had the consistency of little rubber bands. I looked up from my plate and said, “What is this?”

Our Italian community cook laughed at me and said to me, “This is your last meal in New Barnet, so I wanted to give you a special Italian meal, so you won’t forget me.”

I was stilling chewing the awful-smelling garden hose, but I paused long enough to ask, “But what IS this stuff?” She calmly said, “It is calamari... squid.”

The more I ate it, the more I liked it. And she got her wish. Whenever I order calamari at a restaurant, I hear her voice saying to me, “this is a special meal, so you won’t forget me.” And I haven’t forgotten.

Back in the Book of Exodus, there is a scene in which Israel HAS forgotten. Up to this point, the people of Israel had witnessed so many powerful miracles by God. God freed them from slavery in Egypt, through the powerful plagues. Then God led them safely through the sea, while Egypt’s army was swallowed up in the sea. When the people of Israel were thirsty in the desert, God gave them fresh water to drink.

Now, after all of these miracles, you might think that the people of ancient Israel would have very strong faith in God. You’d think that they would remember all that God had done for them. But human beings seem to have short memories. The people of Israel forgot.

God’s faithfulness in the past meant little to them in their present hunger, so they said to Moses, “Take us back to Egypt – back to slavery – because at least we had food when we were slaves.”

God’s people forgot how faithful God had been in providing all that they needed. The people forgot – but God remembered. They lost faith – God stayed faithful.

So, in the Book of Exodus, God rains down Manna from heaven to feed the hungry people. They are astonished by this heavenly food, and in their astonishment, they ask, “What is this?” In fact, the Hebrew word, “Manna,” literally means “What is this?”

The people ask Moses, “What is this?” In effect, Moses replies, “It is food, so you won’t forget.” What is it? It is a sign that God is always with us. What is it? It is a reminder that God is with those who build the future. Israel was looking backward, longing for the ‘security’ they had when they were slaves. Can you imagine? They wanted to become slaves again!

It makes no sense...yet how often do WE yearn to return to the familiar past, when God is calling us forward into the promised future that only God can provide?

What is it? What is this Manna? It is a sign that we are totally dependent on God for our needs. It is a reminder that every gift of creation is a gift from the Living God; a gift to be shared and cared for.

The Scripture says, "He gave them bread from heaven." And in the sharing of that bread, ancient Israel was invited to remember the many miracles that God had performed on their behalf, the miracles they forgot when they convinced themselves that God had abandoned them. But God had not forgotten them – so when they ate this wonder bread, they were called to remember.

At the beginning of the 6th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus performed another miracle with bread. He fed at least 5,000 people with just a few loaves. But all too quickly, the people forgot the meaning of the miracle.

As chapter six continues to unfold, the crowd chased Jesus around Galilee. Apparently, they had not discovered a profound faith in Christ. Rather, they appear to follow him because they are looking for another free meal. They want to experience another miraculous show. They said to Jesus, "What sign can you show us so that we may believe in you?" Don't you want to shout at them and say, "He just fed 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread. Isn't that enough proof for you?"

The people lose their focus – but God chooses once again to reveal the bread from heaven.

Now remember – the FIRST time that God sent bread from heaven, the people looked at it and asked, "What is it?"

In the Gospel, Jesus changes the question from "What is it?" to "Who is it?" Who is the 'bread from heaven?' And Jesus answers, "I am. I am the bread of life. I am the bread from heaven."

It is as if Jesus is saying, "Moses gave you a SIGN of God's love – but I AM God's love made tangible. Moses gave you a SIGN of God's presence, but I AM God walking among you. Moses gave you a SIGN that you depend on God for everything, but I will open my arms on the cross and show you what total dependence on God really looks like."

So, we should no longer ask, "WHAT is the bread from heaven." We need to ask, "WHO is this bread of life?" Jesus.... Jesus is the bread from heaven, he is the bread of life. And he reminds us in the Eucharist – and in so many ways - that HE IS WITH US.

In Holy Communion, we find the bread of life – here is where we find him. Here he calls us to remember all that God has done for us in the past.

In Holy Communion we meet him, the one who tells us that God is with us at every moment of our daily lives. Here is where we meet him, the one who calls us into that future that God has planned for us.

Right now, due to covid-19, for a year most Catholics have not been able to attend Mass and to receive the Eucharist because they have been shielding because of their health condition. But some of us are lucky and are able to attend Mass and have been nourished by the Eucharist, and we are experiencing Christ's presence and strength in many ways during these days of quarantine. We are still Eucharistic people.

Saint Augustine once said that when we receive the Eucharist, the bread of life, we become what we receive. Or, I should say that we become WHO we receive. We become more Christ-like.

Jesus calls us to the sacred meal, so that we can become the meal that feeds the world with his love. The more we receive Christ in the sacraments, the more we become Christ for the world.

Every time you receive the Eucharist, in a way you are becoming the bread of life for others.

You become the Eucharist which invites people to remember that God is with us.

You become the bread of life that can feed hungry people during these trying times.

You become the feast of compassion that helps to turn mourning into healing.

You receive the bread of life – so that you can become the bread of life.

If you ever wonder “Where is God,” or “What is God up to?” The answer should be clear - God is here in the Eucharist, and God is here in his people.

Fr Patrick