

Homily for 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD
Readings: Exo 16:2-4,12-15; Ps 77(78); Eph 4:17, 20-24; Jn 6:24-35
Theme: Beyond our Need for Physical Food

Last Sunday, through the prophet Elisha in the first reading and Jesus in the gospel, God multiplied barley loaves for a hundred of the sons of the prophets and five thousand men, respectively. Thus, God knows how to take care of the hunger of his people. However, man must not live by bread alone (cf. Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4; Lk4:4).

Fifteen days after the people of Israel left the land of Egypt and arrived in the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, they began to complain against Moses and Aaron about food. We can identify three complaints from the reading, namely:

- They should have died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt.
- They could sit down to pans of meat and eat bread to their heart's content.
- They have been brought to starve to death in the wilderness.

Although they were addressing Moses and Aaron, their complaint was indirectly against God. God had brought them out of Egypt; hence they said they would have preferred to die by God's hand in the land of Egypt. In bringing them out of Egypt, the people believe that God wants to starve them to death in the wilderness. Moses understood their complaint and turned to God. And God said to Moses, 'I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel...you will learn that I, the Lord, am your God.' God then provided for them quails for meat and manna for bread.

The psalmist recounts the generosity and care of God. 'He rained down manna for their food and gave them bread from heaven. Mere men ate the bread of angels.' Jesus is going to give us his body and blood as our eternal food. Although the people were hungry in the wilderness for a time, God's long-term plan was to settle them in their land where they will never be hungry again. Hence, the psalmist says, 'he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won.' God has an eternal plan for us. We may be hungry on earth, but his eternal plan is to bring us to his eternal home, where He will banish hunger forever. The experience of the people of Israel teaches us not to be short-sighted and quickly forget our past. God had performed so many signs among them in Egypt to liberate them from the oppressive force of Pharaoh. Yet, they forgot only after fifteen days. We, too, can be forgetful of the generosity of God and complain when there is a slight lack of our material needs. Complaints can lead to bearing grudges and cause rift and dissension. Keeping God and his works before our eyes can help us go beyond looking solely at earthly food. Earthly food can leave us hungry again and again, but the food, the word of God, the body and blood of Jesus that God wants to give us lasts forever.

In the gospel, the crowds, having had enough to eat from the five barley loaves and two fish, continued to search for Jesus. He had crossed over by boat with his disciples to Capernaum. Jesus tells the people that they were looking for him because they had bread to eat. They are not looking beyond the food to the deeper meaning of the miracle. The essence of the miracle was to draw them to follow God and save their souls. 'Do not work for the food that cannot last, but work for the food that endures to eternal life.' The miracle was supposed to draw them to believe in Jesus, the son of God. Hence Jesus says to them, 'This is working for God: you must believe in the one he has sent.' The physical food should move them to believe in Jesus. But they have remained at the level of the physical food. Jesus is the bread of life who quenches our hunger, gives life to the physical body, nourishes and prepares the soul for eternal communion with God.

The bread, manna that God gave to the people of Israel in the wilderness, was only a shadow of the true bread from heaven. Jesus Christ now gives us that bread as his body in the Eucharist. To truly appreciate the body of Christ in the Eucharist and derive the benefits, the

people needed to put off their own ways of doing things and follow the new life that Jesus was introducing. In the second reading, Paul tells the Ephesians to ‘put off the old self, which belongs to the former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.’ The ‘mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution’ to put on the new self, created in God’s way. To achieve that goal, we need to look beyond physical food and earthly things to deepening our spiritual relationship with Jesus.