

SUNDAY SERMON

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*Introductory Psalm: Ps 107:1-9 – Reading: Ex 16:2,3,11-18 – Epistle: Acts 2:41-47 – Gospel: John 6:1-15
Text for the sermon: John 6:30-35*

The Israelites in the wilderness of Sin and crowds following Jesus in Galilee have many qualities that resemble our societies today. As then, today as well we hear voices of grumbling, greed, slogans of populist utopian visions of a better country which often excludes interdependence with others and wants to build walls. However, the message which comes from what we hear in today's liturgy of the Word clashes with the model that our social leaders have. The message is clear: there is more than enough in this world for everyone – no one needs to lack the basics of life and each one of us is responsible for our communities and wider societies.

I see many common threads in the readings chosen for this Sunday (which are not always so obvious). Thus I shall choose only a few to show how they relate to each other and what light they can shed on our life today. In our *Notre Dame de Sion* Congregation we have the tradition of studying all the Sunday texts together – and what I will do today is to share our way of reading the Scriptures which is not necessarily a way that represents the Catholic Church or any other Christian denomination.

All readings speak of the experience of a community that is on the way and that experiences dissatisfaction with what they have. The first reading from the book of Exodus speaks about grumbling Israelites in the desert of Sin, who nostalgically dream about 'pots of meat and all the food we wanted' (v. 2). The first excitement of being free has cooled down, memory already has blanched and the hardship of life in the desert has become prominent in their life. As the revolt becomes ever stronger, God hears the grumbling and provides manna and flesh for the Israelites, so they know that 'God is the Lord, their God' (cf. v. 11). Every day there will be food and each member of the community has to gather exactly a portion – an omer – (for Shabbat a double portion). Because of the precise amount, some commentators (e.g. Ibn Ezra) understand the Hebrew words *man hu* – as the manna is referred to in our text – in the sense of 'appointed', 'allocated', the allocated portion – an omer – no more, no less, enough to satisfy the need. Furthermore, not only the amount but also the food was the same for everyone, and it was provided regularly at an appointed time and without any work. It is 'the bread that the Eternal has given to them to eat' (cf. v. 15). Moreover, greed for more than an omer was not worth pursuing, as they quickly learned (v. 18).

However, this food from heaven was not merely physical food – it was also a sign of God's mercy and kindness, as well as a test for the Israelites in view of dependency and trust in God. All they needed was provided, but they had to have enough faith and not take more. Be satisfied with what God provides. To this day, a Jewish meal begins with a blessing and finishes with *birkat hamazon* – grace after the meal – expressing gratitude. Thus we read in our Psalm 107, v. 8-9:

'Let them give thanks to the Eternal for the unfailing love, and God's wonderful deeds for human-kind, for God satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things'.

In the Gospel as well Jesus relates to the motif of manna while feeding the hungry crowd that follows Jesus looking for signs. The scene takes place on the other side of the lake, people follow Jesus and it is Jesus (in other synoptic Gospels it is the disciples) who notices that the people are hungry, so he asks the disciples to feed them. Philip, seeing the multitude (v. 10: 5000 people) thinks practically and says that they do not have such an amount of money, while Andrew indicates how little food they have (maybe thinking in 'lifeboat ethics': me before the others – thus in terms of my own stomach): they have only two fish and five loaves of barley bread. It seems that only Jesus has eyes of faith. Jesus takes the bread, says the blessing and distributes it; he then does the same with the fish. When all had eaten their fill, 12 baskets were gathered with the remains of bread. We do not know what happens with this food – it is interesting that the story has an open ending ...

All the numbers in this reading are symbolic: $5+2=7$, 5000, 12. They contain many allusions to other well-known stories such as that of Elisha (2 Kings 4 – feeding the hungry), Moses and Israel in the desert, etc. These narratives tell of Israel's experience of how God constantly performs miracles and supports God's people. And Jesus (or the writer of this text, to be more precise) hopes that this event will be understood beyond the plain meaning. However, as we heard today, to see with the eyes of faith and trust was difficult even for those who witnessed the sign.

There is another common motif which is more hidden in the first reading, and that is the relationship between manna and the multiplication of loaves by Jesus to the Torah – God's teaching. The rabbinic commentators see the manna as food provided by God so that the Israelites learn who God is and what it means to walk on the paths of the Torah. Thus, in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, a third century halakhic midrash on Exodus, we read (Pesichta to *Vayhi Beshalach*, Lauterbach trans.): "But God said: 'If I bring Israel into the land now, every one of them will immediately take hold of his field or his vineyard and neglect the Torah. But I will make them go round about through the desert for forty years so that, having the manna to eat and the water of the well to drink, they will absorb the Torah.'" The support given by God to Israel through the manna gave this generation the unique opportunity to study Torah – thus there is a relationship between the meal and Torah.

This Gospel event is situated during the time of Jesus' teaching in Galilee, when Jesus' main activity consisted in walking and teaching about the Kingdom of God, the eschatological time which has begun, but which awaits its accomplishment (n.b. often in the Scriptures, eschatological time is allegorically presented as a banquet, e.g. Isa. 25). But this Kingdom of God is realized only when the followers of Jesus are able to put in practice what they learned and experienced while they were with their Master.

Therefore, where does the true miracle happen, where is the sign ...? As you probably noticed, I left out one reading that we also heard today – the one from the Acts of the Apostles. This book tells the story of the first Christian communities and their way of life, their struggles with understanding who Jesus is and how they should live a life that follows God's teaching. Our excerpt draws an image of a perfect community: a community formed through celebration (ritual), prayer, and charity – a community that shares with one another and with those in need: 'They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people'. For my *Notre Dame de Sion* Congregation, this text was given by our founder as a model for our community life. But I think it can be a model for any community or group who aspires to live a life of faith and of effort to walk according to God's teaching. Thus, the real miracle lies with a community that is able to live with its allocated portion, whose members believe that God provides, and that shares with those who are in need. In today's world, commu-

nities with such a vision are more needed than ever – our societies are becoming ever more wealthy, collecting ever more, instead of sharing the goods with those who come knocking on our doors from ‘the other side of the shore’. Each one of us is called to be a sign / a miracle of God, because being inspired and acting upon the inspiration, we are the sign of God, and a tool in forming a better society of peace, justice and love.

Thus, after spending the whole week together and nourishing our life through the study of the Psalms (the Torah) during this Jewish-Christian Bible Week, it is now time for us to go and become a sign / a miracle of God.

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