

BACKGROUND NOTES

18TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Psalm 77/78

This psalm is the second longest psalm and we are only reading a few verses from it today. The chosen verses parallel the Gospel passage.

They are a poetic rendition of God's providing his people with food while they are crossing the wilderness after being freed from slavery in Egypt.

The psalm is ascribed to Asaph who was a singer/musician in the Jerusalem Temple during the reigns of David and Solomon. (1 Chronicles 6: 39)

At first, the psalmist urges the listeners to pass on the sacred history of Israel and the role God played in it to the next generations, just as he learned it through oral tradition.

He then gives us in poetic terms an account of God providing manna for the famished Israelites as they crossed the desert.

The word *Manna* in fact means "What is it?" which is the question the Israelites asked when they first encountered it (see 1st Reading).

It is thus described in the book of Numbers:

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its colour was like the colour of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. (Numbers 11: 7-8)

God's power is displayed not only in the way he looks after his people, but also in the whole of creation:

*Yet he commanded the clouds above,
and opened the gates of heaven.*

He rained down manna for their food.

The Gospel John 6: 24-35

As often happens in John's gospel, a long theological discourse follows one of Jesus' "signs". Here it is the feeding of the 5000, which we read last week.

The verses just before our passage tell of Jesus walking on the water which the crowd did not witness, hence their first question: "*When did you come here?*"

Jesus and the crowd at cross purposes

Throughout the text people seem to be at cross purposes. Jesus' answers do not correspond to the questions people ask. There seems to be much confusion.

For example, in answer to their first question: "*When did you come*", he tells them to work for food that will last.

Later they ask, "*What must we do if we are to do the works that God wants?*" and Jesus answers "*you must believe in the one he has sent*".

What sign will you do?

Despite the fact that they have seen Jesus feeding all these people, they ask for a "sign" which would prompt their belief. They hark back to the events of the past, the feeding of the Israelites in the desert, but Jesus' answer concerns the here and now: "*It is my father who gives you the bread from heaven...it gives life to the world...I am the bread of life*"

All along Jesus seeks to redirect the crowd's focus on the main point: He is the bread come down from heaven.

The bread of life and the living water from the well

Several parallels can be seen between this episode and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4: 7-26)

Just as the whole exchange between Jesus and the woman is not really about water quenching one's thirst, in the same way here the point is not about bread needed to feed one's body.

The woman asks: "*Give me this water*", here the crowd plead "*Give us that bread always*".

Jesus' answers the woman: "*Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.*" Here he is even more explicit: "*He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst.*"