

Homily based on the readings from August 4, 2024 (Exodus 16.2-4, 12-15; Ephesians 4.17, 20-24; John 6.24-35)

One of the best ways to understand God's perspective on human beings is to spend time taking care of young children. On the one hand, we love our children unconditionally and would do almost anything to keep them safe and healthy. On the other hand, we are all aware that they can be *extraordinarily* exasperating. Most of us, I am sure, have heard the following litany coming from the back seat of the car: "I'm hungry. I'm thirsty. I'm tired. Are we there yet?"

Today's first reading, from the Book of Exodus, basically picks up during the initial stage of an extremely long road trip. Just a few days earlier, God had liberated the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt – miraculously dividing the waters of the Red Sea so the people could cross in safety. As soon as the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, God led them to an oasis, with "twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees." What happened next? Immediately the people started

grumbling, complaining that they did not have enough food. They even had the *audacity* to claim that they had been better off in Egypt – where they had been mercilessly beaten and overworked, where Pharaoh had *literally* ordered the murder of all their male children. It is difficult to imagine, from God’s perspective, how incredibly *ungrateful* these complaints must have sounded: “I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. I’m tired. Are we there yet?”

Nevertheless, just like any parent or grandparent, God was never going to let his children actually go hungry. In the evenings, he gave them an abundance of quail to eat. In the mornings, he provided them with manna, a mysterious white substance that tasted like “wafers made with honey.” We really have no idea what manna was made of – in fact, the Hebrew word *manna* literally means “What is this?” Whatever it was, for forty years this heavenly bread provided nourishment for hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of people as they journeyed across the wilderness.

Sitting here in relative safety and comfort, we might imagine that we would behave differently – that we would have the wisdom and the courage to submit to God’s protection. That is almost certainly *not* the case. Although we may be more accustomed to the *illusion* of stability, most of us – as soon as we encounter an empty refrigerator or an overdrawn bank account – are just as likely to lose confidence in God’s plan for our lives. Even though God has taken care of us for as long as we can remember, the urge to *panic* in the face of uncertainty is unbearably powerful.

One of the defining qualities of *sainthood*, in fact, is placing complete and total trust in God’s providence. For example, Saint Francis of Assisi renounced a substantial inheritance when he was in his mid-twenties and survived for the rest of his life by begging. Saint Teresa of Calcutta walked away from the serenity and security of a *convent* to live and work among the poorest of the poor. There can be no better example, though, than our Blessed Mother, who accepted on faith the *unimaginable* responsibility of bearing and nurturing the Son of God.

There is no question that God takes care of the earthly needs of the people who follow him. At Mass this past weekend, we heard the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Today's Gospel *continues* and *expands upon* that narrative. God is still providing bread to those who hunger, but he is not concerned primarily with their *physical* nourishment. In fact, Jesus rebukes the people who are following him simply because of the loaves and the fishes. He tells them that they need to seek something better, something *permanent*: "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life."

What is this *food that endures for eternal life*? It is certainly not bread, which crumbles after a few days sitting on the counter. It is certainly not fish, which spoils even faster than that. Jesus, of course, evokes the memory of *manna*, the mysterious substance the Children of Israel had consumed in the desert. Nevertheless, despite its miraculous qualities, despite its divine origin, manna was *not* the bread of life. It was simply

a forerunner, creating a hunger that would later be satisfied by something else.

So what is the true bread of heaven? After two thousand years of evangelization and catechesis, the answer to this question may seem obvious – but at the time it would have been inconceivable. The bread of heaven is not a *what* but a *who*. Jesus himself proclaims:

I am the bread of life;
whoever comes to me will never hunger,
and whoever believes in me will never thirst.

God does not just *give* us food; he *is* the food. Once we partake of this divine sustenance, which we will have an opportunity to do in just a moment, we can never truly be hungry or thirsty or tired again. When we consume the living body of Jesus Christ, our own bodies are united with his divine nature. God loves his children so much that he is not just *feeding* us, but *changing* us. All we have to do is open our mouths.