

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B)

4<sup>th</sup> August 2024

‘O, Bread of Heaven’

Exodus 16: manna from heaven    Ps 77: *Mere men ate the bread of angels ...*

Eph 4: *do not go on living the aimless kind of life that pagans live*

Jn 6: 24–35: *I am the bread of life ...*

Scott Hahn, formerly a Protestant scripture scholar in America, describes in the Introduction to one of his books, how when he was teaching his students the Gospel of John, he would always just have to *miss out* Jn ch.6. This was not because he thought it unimportant — just the opposite! — but simply because he could not reconcile the content of that sublime chapter with some diminished belief in the meaning of the Eucharist. It was a niggling dilemma for him; but he could see, even then, that Jn 6 admits only of full *Catholic* understanding of the Eucharist. Eventually, he became a Catholic! There isn’t really any way in which to understand these words of Christ in this chapter of the Gospel other than the way the Catholic Church teaches, namely that Christ willed and intended to leave His very own self — His very presence, life, and divine self — to us under a sacramental form, the Eucharist, the “Bread of Life.” Catholic Tradition speaks

of the ‘Real Presence.’

I spoke last week about how and why we suddenly get *Jn 6* cropping up in the middle of the summer of ‘Year B’ (the lectionary year of St Mark). Happily, it gives us a sequence of Sundays in which to delve deeply into this great ‘Mystery of Faith,’ the Sacrament & Sacrifice of the Most Holy Eucharist. It is the greatest gift of Christ to His Church, for with it He leaves not just ‘something’ holy for us, but He leaves us *Himself* ... His very self! Jesus dwells at the heart of the Church, at the heart of each of our churches (tabernacle) and indeed in our own hearts when we are able to receive Him in Holy Communion. This is the living God, giving Himself to us in a way that we can receive — as our spiritual food.

But there is also a long pre-history to the Eucharist: Jesus’s introduction of this great new Sacrament at the Last Supper in 33AD did not come ‘out of nowhere,’ and it’s that which I wish to dwell on this Sunday, providing some background to what Jesus then did. Two of the key elements of the Jewish background to the Eucharist are

these: the *Passover* (Exodus 12) and the *Manna from Heaven* (Exodus 16 — today's first reading), both dating back to c. 1250BC. These are not the only elements — another would be, for example, the 'Bread of the Presence,' kept in the Jewish Tent of Meeting (later, the Temple) — but they will suffice for now.

The **Passover** ritual took place on the vigil of the exodus from Egypt, as the people of Israel prepare to be released from slavery, and it involved the sacrifice of a spotless young lamb, and a hurried ritual meal, along with the marking of their houses with the blood of the lamb. It was in the context of a Passover supper, then, that Our Lord set his Last Supper / first Mass over 1000yrs later. The Passover was the key 'living memorial' rite of the Jews, for the sacrifice they made, annually, recalled and re-lived the greatest act of redemption they experienced God having worked for them. When Our Lord chose to memorialize His own perfect and irreplaceable sacrifice, He did so, not by chance or coincidence, but by divine intention, within the setting of the Passover, at the very

time of Passover, in Jerusalem, in the vicinity of the Temple. It's important to realise that the Mass is the *fulfilment* of the Passover: the Jewish Passover was the God-willed pre-cursor to the Eucharist; when God commanded the Hebrews on the brink of exiting Egypt to celebrate the Passover, the Mass was already in His Mind and foreknowledge. It is no lucky coincidence or useful crossover: *it was always intended*. The spotless lamb of the Passover, sacrificed, with the blood shed used to mark the redeemed people, now passes over to the utterly spotless Lamb of God, Jesus, who is sacrificed on the Cross, and whose blood redeems the world, freeing us from sin. What a giant leap for mankind to get its head round! What a mental high-jump for the Apostles in that Cenacle of the Last Supper, as they tried to comprehend the re-writing of the Passover ritual that night, as Jesus uttered new and famous words, hitherto unheard and unimagined: *This is My Body, given up for you ... This is My Blood, poured out for you, the Blood of the new and ternal covenant*.

The second pre-cursor of the Eucharist is the **Manna**, a miraculous flour-like substance that the Hebrews relied on daily for sustenance through the wilderness years after departing Egypt. They truly thought of it as ‘bread from heaven,’ as a ‘supernatural bread,’ as the psalm today recalls: “*He rained down manna for their food, and gave the bread from heaven; mere men ate the bread of angels. He sent them abundance of food.*” God is feeding His people Himself with His very own hand. This is what, last Sunday, we reflected on, as being the very sort of action that Jesus did as He multiplied the loaves and fish. The response of the people to that was to try and “come and take Him by force and make Him king.” Why? Because it was a *Messianic* sign. Jesus had performed a miracle that was truly divine: feeding His people, just as God had done in the past, in the wilderness, with that manna. This provides the introduction, then, to the great Eucharistic discourse of Jesus in Jn 6, and the debate that ensued amongst His hearers. The people already understood the connection between the manna with which

they were fed of old, and the food which they were expecting Jesus now to bring them. Our Lord quickly has to ‘move them on’ from greedy ideas about food to fill their stomachs to ‘food to fill their souls.’ And so, even though the gift of the Eucharist is still some way off — it will have to await the Last Supper, night before the Sacrifice of the Cross — he sets to teach them here, at Capernaum, by the Lake, to expect a truly supernatural — i.e. *spiritual*, not just miraculous — sustenance, a new “bread from heaven.” And then, when they do ask for that new, Messianic, gift from Him, He makes the bold claim (in fact, the *shattering* claim) — another giant leap of faith for His hearers and disciples! — that *He is* that Bread of Life: not just that He will *give* it, but that He *is* it. These words bear repeating, as they echo down the centuries from that day in Capernaum as constitutive of the Christian faith, built on the ministry, the words, the *absolute Truth*, of the Son of God: “*I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to Me will never be hungry; he who believes in Me will never thirst.*” As Scott Hahn admitted, even when he was

unwilling to, there are no two ways about Jesus's intended meaning here: He fully intended to, and does, give Himself to us under the forms of food & drink.

What we have seen today, then, is that Our Lord's bold teaching on His Eucharistic gift — both the *sacrifice* and the *feeding* — would have been consistent with what His Jewish hearers understood from their own past experience with God's revelation to them and saving actions with them, in the Passover and in the Manna from Heaven. Whilst Our Lord's new gift was, indeed, truly novel — a great leap forward — it was by way of continuity, not disruption; consistency, not divergence. He was doing what God had always done, giving Himself to His people for their spiritual care, but in a way that was of a wholly new and hitherto-unimaginable degree — a “God of Surprises” as has sometimes been said!

We shall continue our exploration of the Eucharist next Sunday, in this sequence of reflections drawn from Jn 6. But, for now, as today, 4<sup>th</sup> August, is the feast of the patron saint of parish priests — the extraordinary French

cleric who ministered for over 40 yrs in the backwater of Ars in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., St Jean-Marie Vianney — I would like to end with a couple of mini-quotations of his, maxims that sum up his own deep faith in the Eucharist, and which express very simply all that Jesus gives us in this His sacramental self-gift:

*There is nothing so great as the Eucharist. If God had something more precious, He would have given it to us.*

*If we really understood the Mass, we would die of joy!*