

MORNING PRAYER
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
03.10.24

When Moses led the people of Israel out of their servitude in Egypt it was not long before they began to murmur against him and complain about the conditions under which they found themselves. Freedom was not exactly what they had expected it to be. The main thing was they were hungry, so God sent down from heaven a strange kind of bread, which they had never seen or tasted or even heard of before. They called it “manna” which means “What is it?”

The Bible does not tell us if they liked it or not, but it does tell us that after a while they got tired of it. That’s when the murmurings began. The manna kept them alive. It was what they needed but not what they really wanted. God does that a lot. He gives us what we need, which is not necessarily what we want, and the murmurings begin.

So it was in the New Testament lesson for today. Jesus turned out not to be the kind of savior the people had in mind, so they began to murmur against Him. Ironically the murmuring started in the midst of a discussion about the manna. The murmuring against Jesus echoed the murmuring against Moses in the Old Testament lesson. Or perhaps I should say that the murmuring against Moses prefigured the murmuring against Jesus.

Jesus calls Himself the bread of life and says that, like the manna, He came down from heaven. He came to give life to the world, and He came because He was sent by the Father. That's an important point in Trinitarian theology. Neither the Son nor the Spirit does anything on His own. All divine activity is initiated by the Father. That is why Jesus says, "It was not Moses who gave you that bread from heaven, but my Father, who now gives you the true bread."

The manna kept people alive on the physical level, and, in a sense, the Jews of Moses' day were right in not being satisfied with that. Jesus gives life on the spiritual level, which is eternal life and is the only life that ultimately satisfies human need. It does not, however, satisfy human desires, and it certainly did not satisfy the desires of the people to whom Jesus came. They wanted a messiah who would throw out the Romans, restore the old monarchy, take money and property from the rich and give it to the poor. But Jesus offered no such program.

That is one of the reasons people murmured against Him, but it is not the only reason. They were also offended by the outrageous claims that Jesus was making for Himself. They knew, or thought they knew, His origins and His background: "Is not this the son of Joseph, whose mother and father we know? How then can he say that he came down from heaven?"

Jesus simply went on to repeat and elaborate on His claim. He said that He came down from heaven to feed the world with His own body and blood. You really can't blame the Jews for not understanding that. The sacrament of Holy Communion had not yet been instituted. The sacrifice of His Body and Blood on the Cross had not yet been made. And His closest disciples had not yet perceived that Jesus was none other than God Himself taking human flesh upon Himself for the purpose of redeeming it.

But the Church today knows about all of that and believes it. So the Church, like Jesus, is murmured against for pretty much the same reasons. People approach the Church today with their own agendas and expect the Church to fulfill them. Some seek a range of services that will make their lives easier: day care for children, recreation for youth, trips and other activities for retired people, support groups for those recently divorced or trying to lose weight or to kick a habit such as drinking or smoking. Others expect the Church to be politically active in the support of beneficial legislation and worthy candidates. Still others see the Church as a source of money and publicity and volunteers for charitable enterprises run by other non-profit agencies.

There is nothing wrong with providing any of those things, but there is definitely something wrong when people consider themselves to be customers or patrons in a marketplace of competing churches, and when they evaluate churches on the basis of how well they meet such expectations. The Church, like Jesus, cannot define its mission by what the world expects of it.

We have to offer the world what it needs and not necessarily what it expects. That's what Jesus did.

At the same time, the Church, like Jesus, makes claims about itself that the world considers outrageous. The world calls us arrogant, *big-e-ded*, intolerant, and out of touch with reality when we call sin what it is and error what it is. But just as Jesus defined His mission for Himself, so He defined His essential nature for Himself: "I am the bread of life." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

We have to define ourselves as well. We are the continuing body of Christ on earth and the vehicle chosen by Him to transmit the truth from one generation to the next. We are a colony of heaven set in the midst of an alien world. And in that world we are God's instrument for presenting the Gospel to all people and leading them to repentance and faith.

The Church, like Jesus, is much more than the world recognizes or accepts. We are sent, as Jesus was sent, to offer the world, not what it wants but what it needs. And what it needs is the true Bread from Heaven, Who was sent by the Father to give life to the world. We cannot be dissuaded by what the world thinks of us or expects from us.

Murmurings indeed!

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