

ACCEPTING GOD'S PROVISION – MATURING IN HIS FAMILY

Reading – Exodus 16:2-31

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."

Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'"

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.

The LORD said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'"

That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'"

The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.

Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning."

However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

Each morning everyone gathered as much as he needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much--two omers for each person--and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.'"

So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any." Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out." So the people rested on the seventh day.

The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

1 Introduction

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

[slide] My French sister in law Christine [on the right!] is a nun in the “Little Sisters of the Poor”. They care for destitute old people, and rely wholly on charity. Things can get tight - on many occasions they find there is insufficient food for the hundreds of old people they care for. A cause for panic? They choose to pray. Sure enough, each time, a store out of the blue would send a lorry full of just-in-date produce first thing next morning. God provides!

Remember the meditation last week? The Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea where Pharaoh’s army was drowned, into the desert. [slide] “The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin” Not a comfortable place for such a vast throng, with only a limited supply of sandwiches! But God didn’t abandon his adopted people. As we’ll discuss today, he provided for all their needs, notably with manna – bread from heaven. He taught them to rely on him, share with one another and not grumble, but grow in maturity! Did they pass the test? Do we? [slide]

2 God’s provision and our dependence

The text talks about manna – bread from heaven. Have you ever wondered why it’s called manna? It’s a joke for the Israelites. In Hebrew manna means “what is it?”, because they didn’t know. “What do you want for breakfast?” “I’ll have a bowl of ‘what is it?’” they would say.....So how did God provide this manna? He “rained down bread from heaven”. [slide] They didn’t need to work to grow wheat, grind flour, although they still had to be responsible and gather it. God provided, the manna was renewed each day “The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day.” And as we heard, it was tasty! “It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey”.

God provided manna for 40 years, all the time the Israelites were in the desert. They were totally dependent on his provision. God provided many other things in a similar way – as we heard last week he provided water from a rock, and laws to ensure they would be a true community of God. He also gave protection against enemies, guidance as they followed a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, and finally the promised land itself. Even “clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these 40 years.” Not many BHS in the desert. Or even Next.

Do you think this is irrelevant to you? Let’s see. We, the church, are God’s people as the Israelites were, and we are in an Exodus: Why? God through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross saved us from bondage to sin and death as he did the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. We regained the possibility of a relationship with God. He gives us new birth through water of baptism like Israelites through the Red Sea. He wants us, like Israel in a wilderness, to depend on him.

And we too have bread from heaven; in John 6, Jesus compares himself to manna: [slide] “Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.” The bread of life is Jesus’ flesh - true food because it provides eternal life. Jesus is totally complete in Himself and all we need. The bread of life that Jesus provides is symbolised in communion that we will celebrate later. Thanks to the heavenly bread of Jesus, there is no question of us “dying in the desert” spiritually and not reaching the heavenly promised land, so long as we keep our trust in him.

[slide] Watchman Nee was a hero of the faith, who helped massively to build up the Chinese church. His desert was a lonely 16 years in prison where he died - but his faith remained strong. In his final letter, written on the day of his death, he alluded to his joy in the Lord: "In my sickness, I still remain joyful at heart." About Jesus as bread of life, Watchman Nee said “It doesn’t matter what your personal deficiency is... God has always one sufficient answer, His Son Jesus Christ, and He is the answer to every human need.”

Jesus provided more than spiritual bread – at the feeding of the 5,000 he took a crowd out into the wilderness, multiplied loaves and fishes and provided food divinely. Just as God did for the Israelites. Miracles of this nature still happen. Besides the nuns, listen to this account from missionary Heidi Baker in Mozambique where our friends are now. [slide] Once she found herself responsible for 100 hungry children in a tiny office, when the government had driven them from the orphanage the Bakers had set up. An American diplomat came with chilli for Heidi and her small family. I am now going to read what she said: “I opened the door and showed her all our 100 children – “I have a big family” I pointed out tiredly, but in complete and desperate earnest. My friend got serious “there’s not enough – I need to go home and cook some more”. But I just asked her to pray over the food. “Don’t do this!” she begged, but she prayed quickly. I got out the small plastic plates we used for street outreaches, and also a pot of cornmeal I had. I began serving and right from the start I gave everyone a full bowl. I was dazed and overwhelmed. I barely understood at the time what a wonderful thing was happening. But all our children ate, my staff ate, my friend ate and even our family of four ate. Everyone had enough”. [slide] She trusted, God provided. And there was an excess of plastic bowls, God also multiplies plastic!

We may not get to multiply food, but as Jesus reminds us, “the Father gives good gifts to us his children”. We need to be aware of all the resources that God rains down on us like manna – and thank him for his bread from heaven. Not just food. Make a mental list of all the things you own [pause] – who ultimately provided them? God. Let’s be thankful.

Jesus also teaches us like Heidi and the orphans – and my sister in laws nuns - to live in dependence on our heavenly parent one day at a time; “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry after itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

I’ve focused on Jesus as the bread from heaven but the whole provision of Exodus was renewed in him. Instead of water in the desert he provided living water of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritan woman and all who have faith in him. Jesus saves us against the ultimate enemy, Satan, by defeating him on the cross. He provides guidance as stated in John 14:16 “I am the way and the truth and the life”. He provided the laws of the New Covenant for us to be a perfect community with the law engraved on our hearts, loving God and our neighbour. He provides healing. In Revelation we read of our promised land – which will be the New Heaven and the New Earth. Why not read your Bible and see all the parallels – it’s amazing!

3 God’s fatherly guidelines

Let's go back to the desert. Suppose you have a million people trying to gather food lying around. It could easily get rough, with the strong exploiting the situation and taking all the manna. [can we have a little anarchy from the Israelites] But God didn't allow anarchy – he graciously set up rules too. First, he didn't allow storage. They had to rely on him one day at a time and not pile it up for themselves. Second, God made sure there was sharing and thus equality; “he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.” The young and vigorous ensured the old and weak had enough. No “survival of the fittest” in God's community! And finally he insisted on a day of rest, the Sabbath, providing sufficient for two days the day before.

Think of a good parent – would they make their children worry about whether you would get fed? Would they make their children so insecure they would feel the need for a secret store of food? Would they give some children tiny portions when siblings got massive ones? Would they make them work 24/7? No. Similarly, God wanted HIS family to trust him and to share fairly among themselves.

Jesus reinforced all these rules for distributing manna and they help us lead our normal Christian lives. We're warned by Jesus about storing up wealth solely for ourselves: Remember the rich fool who built barns for all his grain. “God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you’....This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” This needn't mean mortgages, pensions and financial planning are wrong. It's what is in our heart that is key, especially our heart for others.

That's expressed in generosity to the poor. In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul applied the Exodus rules for equality in manna distribution, as he urged the Corinthian church to complete the collection for poor Christians in Jerusalem. These show how important sharing and generosity are for God. Paul says [slide] “But just as you excel in everything....see that you also excel in this grace of giving. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality....as it is written: “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.”” [slides] Jesus commands some of us to be more radically generous, as God is to us; he said to his disciples “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted.”

So we can show our gratitude for “bread from heaven” by being generous to the poor, in line with our wealth. This has many layers. At a local level, we can contribute to the community larder some of the bounty God has given us – I gather they need it. Go for the BOGOFs in Tesco's! We must help those who are struggling financially in our church family – you can contribute to the fund we have for that. But there's also a link globally to “Making Poverty History”. [slide] Picture this. If the world was a village of 100 people, 7 of the citizens would own 60% of the land and houses, and consume 80% of the energy, while 65 citizens would be illiterate, 25 have no access to safe drinking water and 20 so poor that each day's a struggle to stay alive. They are God's family too and we are called to share with them and press our leaders for justice!

Our church can help the poor via its tithes and offerings. Here's a reminder of what our church offerings actually go to, a notice sheet sent out recently to members asking for a response by Tuesday. [slide] I want to read two key points for the benefit of non members here today, since you also contribute via the collection: “PBC is committed to be a **blessing to our world**; to churches, the persecuted, orphans, HIV/Aids victims, street children, widows, and those overseas who do not yet know Jesus. We want to give of ourselves in ways that

help them come to know and follow Him. There is **life-changing potential locally** in Outreach, Children's Ministry, Youth Ministry, Family Ministry, Site development, Community Projects impacting Pembury, Mission, Alpha — the list goes on — all supported by a growing team of passionate Volunteers and Staff.” The church sheet recognises that generosity and sharing is not just a question of relieving physical poverty. By evangelism we can share the living bread of Jesus with the lost – the spiritually destitute. By word, by Alpha, by mission. It needs money but more importantly commitment and willingness to be generous with time – which is a challenge for many of us. But the more of us involved, the less the load on any individuals [slide]

4 The Israelites' response – and ours

So we've seen how God provided and how we can respond. Now in this last section we'll see what can get in the way. There's still a puzzle about Israel in the desert – why didn't God take them the shortest way to Canaan, which would have taken only 10 days? It was deliberate. Exodus 13 says “God did not lead them by the way of the Philistines, although it was nearer. For God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’” Deuteronomy 8 says “The Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.” By discipline, he wanted his family to mature and grow in courage and obedience.

Think - what's your concept of maturity? Let's look at the world's view of maturity. My example was Clint Eastwood but my children suggest – Simon []. Independent, self reliant – no one can tell him what to do. Looks after himself. Trusts no-one. He would grumble if he wasn't entirely free to do what he wants. But God has a different view of maturity, as we'll see.

How did the Israelites respond to Godly provision and parental discipline? They grumbled - even though God had just delivered them from Egypt, killed the firstborn, drowned Pharaoh and his army! They ignored Moses and kept food overnight – so “it was full of maggots and began to smell”. They disobeyed by trying to collect manna on the Sabbath. Later on they did much worse things – like setting up a pagan altar when Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments. They got so impatient waiting for Moses, they preferred worshipping a golden calf, a mere object, to a living God they'd have to obey.

Why so disobedient? Lack of trust. They refused to believe God would provide, saying to Moses “you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” Refusal to adapt, seeing slavery in Egypt with rose tinted spectacles “there we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted” – when there were whips on their backs as slaves and baby boys snatched at birth to be killed! Impatience - ridiculously preferring death to being in the desert! It's a case of “raising complaint to an art form”. And always willing to let feelings overcome their wills “if I don't feel right it's not right”, hence the grumbling. This is childISH behaviour – untrusting, proud, unwilling to change, impatient and letting feelings run riot – but all too common for self-reliant adults as well. But God's concept of maturity isn't the world's view – for him maturity's a childLIKE obedience and reliance on him.

Jesus is also telling us that maturity means relying on him and sharing with one another. What gets in our way? Too often we're like the Israelites – not trusting, proud, unwilling to change, impatient and letting feelings run riot. Trust is key: but WE can get in the way – wanting to provide for ourselves, being self reliant. Not recognising what God has done for us – and not sharing with the poor of the world. I'm not immune – I take too much comfort from the value

of my house and don't give enough to the poor. We need to remind ourselves – and this is crucial - from Deuteronomy “You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.”

If we trust, we can be adaptable, and not grumble say when church routines change “for the sake of the lost”. We can be patient, and await God's timing for his provision – unlike me who is always uneasy when I am not in control of a situation. We can avoid worrying. We can avoid letting our feelings overcome our wills - especially in mending broken relationships.

Like the Israelites we are called to be childlike but not childish. [slide] Jesus said "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” With the Holy Spirit's help, we CAN be trusting and obedient to God in a childlike way, and thus, paradoxically, become mature. We have the perfect example – Jesus tempted in the wilderness. His forty days in the wilderness after his baptism, that people meditate on in the forty days of Lent, parallel the forty years of the Israelites. There we saw him resist where the Israelites failed. When he was hungry Satan tempted him to turn stones to bread, Jesus answered, “It is written: `Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” He trusted his Father from day to day and obeyed him. Let's try to be like him!

Conclusion

To draw things together, let's look anew at this line in the Lord's Prayer “Give us this day our daily bread”. Let's acknowledge we're as dependent on God as the Israelites were. The line is saying “God, please meet today's needs for me. I don't want guarantees for tomorrow. Lord, I'll trust you this day, for my daily bread for this life and eternal life. I won't be selfish and will be generous to others. And when I wake up tomorrow morning, like manna, I trust your mercies will be renewed.” That's maturity – accepting God's provision in trust and obedience as a child does. So let's conclude by saying the Lord's Prayer together, thinking of the Exodus, Jesus' heavenly bread and our call to accept God's provision and mature as Christians.

Say Lord's Prayer.

Call for prayer for those feeling a need to acknowledge dependence on God, follow his guidance and mature further as Christians.

We are now going to move into communion, which is sharing the bread from heaven that Jesus provides. By taking it we remember his sacrifice on the cross.

Reading from Matthew 26:17-29 “On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, `The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.' " So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me."

They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?"
Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

[bread]

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

[wine]

Amen.