



SAINT LUKE'S

11TH AFTER PENTECOST
PROPER 13B

EXODUS 16:2-4,9-15
PSALM 78:23-29
EPHESIANS 4:1-16
JOHN 6:24-35

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

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When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?"

My favorite experiences while reading a novel are when the author anticipates my expectations as the reader and purposefully subverts or flips them on their head.

In his novel *Silence*, Shusaku Endo, tells the story of a Fr Rodrigues' ministry to 17th c Japan and its secret Christian communities living under persecution. You'll pardon me for spoiling the climax of the novel if you haven't read it, though the power of reading it on one's own is to be commended.

Fr Rodrigues is imprisoned by a Japanese inquisitor determined to force him to recant his Christian faith. Instead of torturing the young Portuguese priest, he places him in close proximity to the cries of Japanese Christians suffering and declares that only when Fr Rodrigues recants his faith by trampling on an icon of Jesus will their torment be ended.

The well-being and lives of Japanese Christians hang in the balance of his actions, but so do the tenacity of their faith and the future for a Japanese church. "It is only a formality", the inquisitors say, "Only go through with the exterior form of trampling." Endo anticipates the rising voice in my head: Resist! Be strong! The noble and holy action is to remain faithful until death!

And yet when Fr Rodrigues looks at the face of his beloved savior

in the icon, it speaks to him and says “Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world.”

When I first read this the sheer force of the impact of the text upon my perceptions of what was virtuous stunned me and I had to put down the book for a period of time. The most Christ-like action, Endo challenges us, was to endure for others the same sense of shame and desolation which Christ experienced for us.

In my reading of the Exodus passage today, I see the author execute the same knowing inversion of expectation through the actions of God’s provision for the Israelites. “If only we had the fleshpots of Egypt,” they cried, looking back to familiar forms of sustenance, quickly forgetting the context of bondage which surrounded them. The freed slaves looked back to what they knew, hoped for immediate gain, in spite of the loss of freedom which came with it. And what did God do? God rained the bread of angels upon the desert floor in the morning, prompting the people of Israel to pick it up and ask “What is it?”

The people had a particular expectation of how they wanted God to provide nourishment and sustenance for them: The fleshpots of Egypt. Instead, God provides manna from heaven.

This same shattering of expectation happens with the crowds following Jesus immediately after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. The crowds saw the multiplication of the loaves and fish, and

began to search for Jesus as he travelled about, expecting a sort of unlimited bread factory. Jesus sees this and says “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

And even as he goes on to teach them and references the story of the Manna, they say to him “Sir, give us this bread always!” Jesus, shattering their expectations, says “I am the bread of Life.” Not quite the divine bread factory they had expected. This is why when Jesus goes on to stress later in John 6 that they must eat of his flesh and drink his blood, much of the crowd dissipates.

How often in our own lives do we hold aloft our expectations to God, planning to be cared or provided for in one particular fashion, only to pick up our salvation when it comes to us and ask “What is it?”

The people of Israel only wanted a full stomach and a sense of safety. God gave them so much more.

The manna which came down from heaven did not descend simply to fill their bellies day by day, but fell with purpose: to bring them closer to that Promised Land which they had been freed to pursue in the first place.

The crowds came to Jesus seeking to replicate the miracle of the loaves, not realizing that before them stood a much deeper fulfillment.

And in spite of the shortsightedness of the question “What is it?”

I think the question is a useful one. I encourage you today, as you stand around the altar with hands outstretched, to pause for just one moment as you receive the host and ask yourself “What is it?”

This Eucharistic bread is unleavened; it draws us closer to a life of wholeness and purity, one progressively less entranced by the fleshpots of the Egypt of our days past, one with eyes increasingly turned toward the life of the Kingdom of Heaven. Will you allow God to provide the means for you to be drawn into a life of wholeness, of holiness?

This Eucharistic bread is broken; it reminds us of the brokenness still present in our world, and of the great lengths to which Love will go in order to repair the breaches in our communities, our families, and our own hearts. Will you allow God to feed the flame of divine, self-giving Love within you?

The last Eucharist given to a person in their earthly life has been traditionally known as the viaticum: Bread for the journey ahead. Today, do not miss the bigger picture, the wider road, of God’s care and provision for you because your expectations are too small or too limited. Today, allow Christ in the Eucharist to feed more than your own need for peace or security or contentment. Allow this heavenly manna to empower you to sustain not only yourself, but those in your life that God is calling you to serve.

Ask yourself, truly, “What is it?”

AMEN

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