

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

What do we look for in a good doctor? Someone who can listen well to whatever we have to say to them, I suppose. But most of us probably feel that we are best served by those who can diagnose our illnesses well, those who have the skills to read the signs of our health or ill health.

Any sign can be easily misunderstood. Every sign has to be interpreted before it can give up its secrets. Jesus was often misunderstood during his public ministry. The signs that he gave to open people's eyes to see who he was were often misunderstood. When we are reading John's gospel we too can easily miss the signs and the connections that Jesus is making to bring people to a deeper faith and understanding of him.

Our reading from the book of Exodus gives us some of the background to understand our Gospel today. God heard the complaints of the people that he had brought out of Egypt. They thought that God had abandoned them in the desert where they feared that they were dying of hunger. But God showed his care by providing both bread and meat for them to eat. Every day he would give them enough for the day. We are told that he tested them by giving them only what they needed for that day. When the people saw the food that God provided for them each morning they asked Moses, "What is that?"

Their question, "Manna?" became the name of the bread that God was providing for them, the bread from heaven.

What I did not realise was that over time this Manna, this bread that God gave them to eat took on a very powerful symbolic meaning. It came to symbolise Moses and the Law that God handed down to his people through Moses, what became known as the Torah. The faithful people of Israel believed that God nourished them and gave them life through the Mosaic Law.

This helped me to understand how Jesus was challenging the people in today's gospel. We notice first that when people find Jesus they ask him a very banal question, "When did you come here?" If we were there, would we have asked a different question? Would we have asked a question that opened the door for Jesus to reveal himself to us? Would we have perhaps asked, "Where did you come from? or "Who sent you here?" The crowds seem to have missed the sign that he was offering to them by feeding them with five loaves and two fish. They were only thinking of their stomachs. Jesus replies, "Do not work for food that cannot last, but work for food the Son of Man is offering you, for on him the Father, God himself has set his seal."

They understand something of what he is saying here because they ask Jesus what they have to do to do the

works that God wants. Jesus told them, “This is working for God: you must believe in the one He has sent”. But this was not the answer they could accept at this time. They wanted a sign to show them that they should believe in Jesus. They wanted a sign like the sign that Moses gave by giving them bread from heaven to eat.

This was a wonderful way in for Jesus to take them to a new level of understanding and of faith. He told them that it was not Moses who gave them bread from heaven. “It is my Father, who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread.” Jesus was challenging them to move on. They couldn’t just hold on to the gift that God had given them in the past. They could no longer believe that the Mosaic Law was all that they needed to be nourished. Jesus was inviting them now to draw life and strength from him, the true bread from heaven.

Jesus makes it clear that he had come not just to feed and give life to the people of Israel, but to the whole world. “I am the bread of life. Anyone who comes to me will never be hungry; anyone who believes in me will never thirst.”

What happens in us when we hear those words today? Do we see Jesus as the source of our life? Do we thirst after the wisdom that he offers to us to live a full and happy life? Do we come here to the Eucharist to be fed

by Jesus in his Word and in Holy Communion? It is not so easy to allow Jesus to be in the centre of our lives. We get buffeted from every side by things that distract us from the centre. We are encouraged every day to put ourselves first when our deepest desires are to live in love for others. When we make choices about how we are to spend each day we can’t help but be influenced by the world in which we live; and so many in our world do not know Jesus. They have not been given the gift of faith as we have.

Today we begin vocations awareness week. When we hear the word “vocation” we usually think of the call that God makes to priests and religious. But every one of us has a vocation. God calls all us through our baptism to live with the life of Jesus. Each of us is called to listen every day for the way that Jesus calls us to live. Each of us is called to be ever more open to the love that God has for us, so that we can generously offer that love to others. Jesus renews our vocation every time we gather for Eucharist. The Bread of Life feeds us here so that we can live what we are called to be. Jesus sends us out to be his life for our world.