

Proper 13B “Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life.”” John 6.35

Several years ago, in Long Beach, California, a fellow went into a fried chicken place and bought a couple of chicken dinners for himself and his date late one afternoon. The young woman at the counter inadvertently gave him the proceeds from the day—a whole bag of money (much of it cash) instead of fried chicken. After driving to their picnic site, the two of them sat down to open the meal and enjoy some chicken together. They discovered a whole lot more than chicken—over \$800! But he was unusual. He quickly put the money back in the bag. They got back into the car and drove all the way back. Mr. Clean got out, walked in, and became an instant hero. By then the manager was frantic. The guy with the bag of money looked the manager in the eye and said, "I want you to know I came by to get a couple of chicken dinners and wound up with all this money. Here." Well, the manager was thrilled to death. He said, "Oh, great, let me call the newspaper. I'm gonna have your picture put in the local newspaper. You're the most honest man I've heard of." To which the guy quickly responded, "Oh no, no, don't do that!" Then he leaned closer and whispered, "You see, the woman I'm with is not my wife...she's uh, somebody else's wife."

Obtaining the truth is one of our chief occupations as we make our way through life here on earth. We are bombarded with marketing ploys vying for our attention and our money. Before a company can sell us their wares they must sell us confidence in the integrity of their company, their services and their expertise. In the latest crackup in the auto industry, pundits complained that no one would buy a car from a company in jeopardy of bankruptcy. If a company couldn't stay in business, why should a customer buy one of their cars? And who would service it anyway? No, what we look for is someone we can trust, even before we find a good deal. We are looking for the truth. We are searching for something we can believe in.

But there is something more fundamental than finding the truth outside ourselves that we must seek and find before we proceed. We are muddled about what the truth is within ourselves. Often it is our assumptions that guide us in the wrong direction. It is our perspective, that is, the place from which we see things that actually can deceive us. That is why the law requires a number of witnesses before a case may be proven. It isn't simply that the courts wish to prevent against false and lying witnesses who wish to do the

defendant harm. No, it is often the case that the testimony of single witnesses does not reflect the truth because they did not see everything that occurred. We see what we want to see. We hear what we want to hear. We often deceive ourselves accidentally.

So we see the Jews of Jesus day following him around the Sea of Galilee, seeking more of his miraculous power. Jesus healed the sick with a touch. He comforted the people who wandered like sheep without a shepherd. He fed them meals produced miraculously from five loaves and two fish. All this could lead to only one conclusion. The people saw the sign which he had done and said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" And to clarify their meaning John added, "Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, so he withdrew from them." The people were not supposing Jesus to be any old prophet. No they were saying that they believed Jesus to be the long expected Messiah; the anointed one; the king who was to come and throw out the Gentiles; rebuild Solomon's Temple; and rule like a greater David over all the world from Jerusalem. Jesus would have been an unstoppable king. When his armies were hungry on campaign he

could summon up food for thousands out of thin air. When his armies lay dead upon the field he could restore them to life. Who could resist him? Certainly not the Romans. Jesus should be the king of the Jews.

But you see, the Jews were asking the wrong question. They were seeking a Messiah who would restore the Golden Age of Israel. They looked for a worldly kingdom and a secular king to rule them. Jesus put his finger on the problem when he said to the crowds, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” From their perspective there could have been nothing greater to hope for than God to send the Messiah, the king. He would fill their bellies. But Jesus tells them, and us, that there is more to live for than this life and these bellies. There is another life, an eternal life that awaits those who seek after, and believe in Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” Jesus is the fullness of truth that all other bread points to. In him is life eternal.

But as we see in our Gospel, there had been heavenly bread before. Once the Israelites had left their bondage in Egypt they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Their God, the one true God, had fed them with manna from heaven. Manna was like little seeds that fell with the dew and the Israelites went out of their tents and collected it by the basket full. And they always had enough to eat. They did not believe that this manna came from sheer luck. No, they understood that this manna, like the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea was a sign that God loved them, was protecting them, and had a purpose for them. They were his special people.

This manna was real bread from heaven. Did not the Psalms say, “he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance”? Moses had given this powerful sign. Could Jesus give a sign that was just as miraculous? But Jesus sets before them the truth of the matter. Manna was not from heaven, but was like any other bread. Almighty God had given it to them like any other bread. But Jesus was altogether different. He, himself, had come down from

heaven. For all eternity he had been with the Father and had at the last time come down to do the Father's will. He had come down to give eternal life to all the people that the Father had given him.

But was not manna heavenly bread? Had it not come down at the command of the Father? Was it not a sign of his divine love of them? Certainly it was. But it was like every other kind of bread. First of all, it spoiled and became full of worms if it was held overnight. But more importantly, it had only limited effects. The Israelites ate it once, and then again and again. They ate it so much that they complained against the Lord saying that they positively loathed the manna. Yet they went on eating it for 40 years. Why? Because it was not eternal bread and it did not impart eternal life. And in the end that whole generation that had feasted upon heavenly bread for decades died in the wilderness. But Jesus said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever."

It is eternal life that Christ offered to the crowd that day and to each of us who hears the message of the Gospel. We may be surprised at this because we are asking different questions and looking for

different answers. We may be just like the Jews of Jesus' day. We want our bellies full, our needs met and our obstacles removed. We want lives that are at least comfortable and maybe if we get lucky we might be popular and powerful. We are tempted by the apparent success of movie stars and business moguls who seem to be perpetually beautiful and perpetually wealthy. But Jesus asks us to change our perspective, if only for a moment, and ask a different question. If we ask a different question we will find the truth. Jesus wants us to stop asking about this life and be concerned with the life to come. It is not the case that Jesus had no care for our well being in this life. Far from it: he healed the sick and eased the suffering of those who sought him out. Even so he proclaimed the good will of his Father when he asked, "which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" But it is the kingdom that is to come that was Jesus' overriding concern. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

So this is an eternal meal of heavenly bread: Jesus himself. But how shall we get some of it? Shall we buy some? About four years ago, a member of my parish sent her next door neighbor to visit with me about a technical question. This man was an attorney, and more specifically, the executor of a rather large endowment. The endowment's bylaws stated that the funds were to be disbursed charitably and according to grace and not on the basis of worth. The attorney was not a Christian, but took his responsibility as executor very seriously. Oh, that we as Christians took our duties to Christ as seriously as this man did to his vocation! So the attorney asked me to explain to him what grace was. After spending an hour looking through the Hebrew and Greek passages involving grace, I told him that grace was getting something good that you didn't deserve, and mercy was not getting something bad that you did deserve. To this the attorney replied, "I don't believe there is such a thing as a free lunch." There is very little that each of us likes less than owing somebody something; to be indebted to someone; to have an outstanding balance. We do all that we can to make things even, to make some effort, so that we can say that we are pulling our own weight.

But I hope that you can see that there is no amount of money that can buy this heavenly dinner. There is no amount of labor or effort that can be expended that will serve as currency for this feast. Paper will crumble and gold will rust before it is traded for goods in the new heavens and the new earth. But Christ offers himself freely as the meal that will never end. Jesus calls the multitudes to himself and offers to them eternal life. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, God calls, “Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant.”

Let us seek this meal with prayer and faith, knowing that whoever asks receives, whoever seeks finds, whoever knocks will have the door opened to him. Let us not live lives that are constantly worrying over how it will be that we shall get the food that we need and the clothing that we must have. It is the Father’s good will to give to his children all that they need in this world and in the next, if only they will follow him in love and faith. Let us give to the great need of the Church, for by opening our hands to the support of the Church we show that we

understand that all things have come freely from our Father who loved us and gave his own Son up for us. Let us gather up this eternal bread, the good news of Jesus Christ, and let us carry it to each of our neighbors in sure knowledge that those who receive it with joy shall be raised up at the Last Day.