

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Ex 16:2b-4,12-15

READING II Eph 4:17, 20-24

GOSPEL Jn 6:24-35

The story of the manna and the quail is part of the Israelite wilderness experience. Manna is a sticky secretion of two insects which live on the tamarisk tree in central Sinai. The quail are birds that return to the Sinai coast from Europe in the fall. After such an exhausting trip they can be easily caught and killed. Both the manna and the quail illustrate God's providence during the wilderness experience.

The murmuring motif is added to the account of EX 16. Instead of being samples of God's providence, the manna and quail now become the occasion for grumbling against Moses first and then against God. The significance of the grumbling questions the validity of the whole Exodus. The Israelites now would prefer to live and eat in Egypt where they had food in abundance. For the bewildered, the house of bondage is now a land flowing with milk and honey. The goal of the wilderness journey is temporarily in jeopardy.

The author of Ephesians contrasts the way of life of Christians and pagans. Christians are not to walk as pagans do. Borrowing from the baptismal liturgy, the author observes the different stages in the Christian passage through life. They have put off the old man and therefore their former pagan values. They have been renewed: Plunged into Christ through faith. As a result, they have put on new garments symbolizing an entirely new manner of life. Like humankind of Gn 1, Christians made in God's image and are bidden to reflect that image in their walking. That is, in their way of life and their way through life.

In the Gospel, after the miracle of the loaves and fishes the people search for Jesus and ultimately find him. Jesus does not answer their question since they have not perceived the true meaning of the sign. Jesus suggests that they work for the imperishable food which will lead to eternal life. This involves accepting Jesus in faith, but the people think they are merely to believe in some new sign that Jesus will perform — like the manna in the desert. Jesus counters that it was not Moses but his Father who provided the manna. Moreover, the real heavenly bread which the Father will give is Jesus himself. Alluding to the Israelites in the desert, Jesus explains that anyone who comes to him (and therefore believes) will never again hunger or thirst. Jesus reveals himself to the people as God revealed himself to Moses: "I am the God of your fathers" (Ex 3:6; 3:14).

Only the goalkeepers are satisfied. We are tempted to make power and/or pleasure our goal, and not Christ. We think we will be truly satisfied. We are prone to make our job our goal, and not Christ. We expect that we will be truly satisfied. We are challenged to make other people our goal, and not Christ. We anticipate that we will be truly satisfied. Yet only those who keep Christ as their goal find satisfaction. Only the goalkeepers are satisfied.

The temptation for the people in the wilderness is to change their goal. It is to reroute and reorient themselves towards Egypt, not the Promised Land. It is a theological rejection of the person, The Lord God, who has made himself the goal. For the genuine Israelite, life has meaning only insofar as one looks forward to the goal. The God who provides manna and quail will not neglect his people. In Exodus, only the goalkeepers are satisfied.

The temptation for the people in John's Gospel is to opt for another goal. Jesus proclaims that the Father has made him the goal — only on him has the Father set his seal. If one comes in faith to Jesus as the goal, as the only bread which gives life, then such a person is assured of freedom from hunger and thirst. The Son has learned well from the Father — he will provide for those on the journey. In John, only the goalkeepers are satisfied.

Husbands and wives who develop their mutual love around Christ find satisfaction. Leaders who build their power and prestige around Christ experience satisfaction. The gifted who develop their talents around Christ encounter satisfaction. Priests and religious who exercise their vocation around Christ come upon satisfaction. All such people choose to focus on Christ as their goal. They announce that only the goalkeepers are satisfied.

Eucharist deals with the human appetite for food and drink. Eucharist focuses on Christ as the only one who will truly satisfy human longing. Eucharist challenges the community to experience satisfaction by continuing to focus on Christ. Eucharist also proclaims that only the goalkeepers are satisfied.