

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year B

The gospel these past three Sundays have all been about God feeding the children of Israel in the wilderness, manna from heaven, the bread of life, the true bread that gives eternal life – and, in the end, for us, about the Eucharist. The Eucharist *is* our manna from heaven, it is our bread of life, it is our food God-given in the wandering-in-the-wilderness that we call this life. That is – in both Old and New Testaments, both symbolically and literally – it is about the Lord Jesus as nourishment for our souls. The readings from Exodus, the Prophets, from the Book of Kings, have all been a pre-figuration and a preparation for statements made by the Lord in both today's gospel reading and elsewhere:

“I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.”

Everything comes down to this. Everything means this. This is apotheosis of all teaching and theology and doctrine about Christ the Bread of Life, Christ in the Eucharist.

He chose bread to be the sacramental sign of his continuing presence among us. This is because bread, for at least half the world, is the basic foodstuff of life; for the other half it is rice, but the principle is the same. And the two have much in common. Bread is simple, made with the most simple of ingredients; it is commonplace in the west and near east; it is the foodstuff that is most familiar to us in a fundamental, everyday way. When I was young and growing up, money was tight, as it was for many; we had left East London and moved to south Essex. My father worked at Fords and was often called out on strike, so we sometimes struggled financially. One of the things that kept us adequately fed, I guess, was bread – which was cheap and comforting and, above all, filling. I have never

forgotten the phrase: 'to fill out with bread.' In the same way, the Lord used bread as the most basic, cheap and available food there is. You see what this means? He could have used some expensive kind of grain, or something other than bread altogether or, again, a luxury foodstuff; but no, he chose bread, available even to the poorest of the poor in some form or other, with nothing extraordinary or special about it at all.

This is always the way of God: to choose the ordinary and, in the very act of choosing it, to transform it into the extraordinary. It was so even from the beginning: Jesus was born in an ordinary stable (actually, it would have been a cave where the animals were sheltering for the night), rather than in an extraordinary mansion; this had nothing to do with poverty (they could well have afforded a room at the inn), but everything to do with 'ordinariness'. The subjects of Jesus' parables were always the unremarkable, the lowly, even the outcast – lepers, Samaritans, tax-collectors and prostitutes. The saints themselves, over the centuries, were flawed individuals who – in modern psychological parlance – 'had issues'. St Francis of Assisi suffered from debilitating scruples and imagined he was damned, Philip Neri had a germ phobia, St Ignatius of Loyola was an obsessive-compulsive, St Thérèse of Lisieux was a complete neurotic (and knew it) – and they were, in every way, ordinary; it was only their total commitment to God that made them extraordinary. How could not be otherwise?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: "Do ordinary things with extraordinary love." Desmond Tutu wrote: "Your ordinary acts of love and hope point to the extraordinary promise that every human life is of inestimable value." And to quote Blaise Pascal, probably one of the most favourite philosophers of mine: "Small minds are concerned with the extraordinary; great minds are concerned with the ordinary." This is always

and invariably true. To seek for the extraordinary – or, worse, to want to *be* extraordinary – is a symptom of emotional immaturity. The need to be ‘special’ is what you must bring to the altars of celebrity, to the synthetic stars in a digital sky, to the ephemeral, superficial flotsam of worldly acclaim, if you are to pray for the same gifts. Nothing is naturally extraordinary: it is only the embrace of love that makes it extraordinary in the eyes of God. St Thérèse of Lisieux said: “If you do nothing more than pick up a pin for no other reason than the love of God, you have done an extraordinary act.”

The most wonderful things in nature are ordinary and all around us. Look at the beauty and perfume of a rose; yet the 18<sup>th</sup> century mystic Angelus Silesius said this:

“The rose has no ‘why’. It blooms for no other reason than it blooms. And it does not ask if anyone is admiring it.”

A modern Muslim writer has said:

“Let us go to an ordinary street to feel that life is extraordinarily beautiful, filled with all the ordinary things that make up our daily life, with cats around, with children playing, with washing hanging out on the line, with people wandering about aimlessly; and let us know that our love for all this makes it absolutely extraordinary.”

The ordinary is nothing more than the extraordinary which has not yet been seen and loved. This is how many who do not share our particular convictions might understand the Eucharist. Bread is – yes, certainly – very ordinary: that’s the whole point. It is Christ’s loving self-giving that makes it extraordinary. And, because it is metaphysically

and sacramentally extraordinary, anything less than the Real Presence in the Eucharistic bread would be a bottomless disappointment: a sacramental symbol would not be enough; bread and wine which were specially blessed but remained bread and wine would not be enough; a sacred sign would not be enough; a 'shared meal' would not be enough. If we did not possess the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, God would be short-changing us and leaving the ordinary exactly as it is – everyday bread and wine. That would be a lie and would be totally inadequate for our spiritual needs.

The Eucharist is a perfect revelation of the extraordinary at the heart of the ordinary – and that is what the gospels for the past three Sundays or so have been all about.