

Readings: Exodus 16:4-15, John 6:30-40

One of my favourite restaurant chains before the pandemic – and one to which I hope to be able to return before too long – was Le Pain Quotidien, which I frequented both in Chelsea and on my arrival here in Kensington.

I am never quite sure whether this chain was deliberately set up to have overtones of Christian teaching in its name and its philosophy, but it nevertheless offers us very familiar imagery. Of course, the name, meaning “Daily Bread”, links it with a phrase used by Christians in almost every act of worship the world over: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

I remember being hugely moved one day to find a decorated blackboard in the restaurant, illustrated with drawings of bread and wine (with admittedly the addition of some pots of jam and bottles of oil), which invited visitors to “Join us at the Table”. It explained underneath: “We believe that community is what nurtures, inspires and feeds the soul. This is why we have a communal table in each of our restaurants.”

It is hard for a Christian reading this not to be struck that this is also what unites us as we join one another at God’s Table to receive Holy Communion, and as we gather, in any service of shared worship, to allow our souls to be inspired and fed.

“Le Pain Quotidien” could also be the title of today’s Old Testament reading, as we heard the Lord promising Moses that he would rain bread from heaven every morning, and the Israelites could gather as much as they needed for their daily needs.

Manna from heaven is familiar concept, even among those who are not ardent readers of the Bible. The word Manna itself simply means in Hebrew, “What is it...?” as the puzzled Israelites woke to find the ground covered with small round things. We heard that they said to one another, “It is manna: for they wist not what it was.”

I have heard – and indeed appropriated for school assembly use – a great sermon in which the preacher produced a bag of Cheesy Wotsits as a visual aid to preach on this reading, telling his congregation, “They all got up and said, “wotsit – what is it?”

The evocative idea encapsulated in the story of the manna and quails from Heaven, that God gives us each day whatever we need, underlies much Christian faith and morality.

The Israelites are forbidden from gathering more than they need for the day ahead, as it will turn rotten overnight.

It is a powerful reminder that we are all naturally acquisitive; the scenes of people stockpiling lavatory paper at the start of the first lockdown remind us how little we trust God to provide, and how much we put ourselves first before others in direct contravention of the Bible’s teaching. Who can forget the images of the weeping, exhausted intensive care nurse unable to buy food because others had taken more than their daily bread?

Some might say that we are driven to such actions because of the knowledge that others will take everything for themselves, but if we as Christians cannot break a cycle of self-orientation, then perhaps no-one else will model this kind of restraint and generosity.

Our Exodus reading tells us of the constant murmuring of the Israelites against the Lord.

Most modern translations use the more explicit word “complaining”, but there is something quite evocative about the idea that people don’t speak their complaints out loud, but mutter or murmur them to one another when they think others aren’t listening. I think it is very easy for a society to become one where there is lots of murmuring, sotto voce complaining, even amongst those who have been given a great deal.

The Israelites, after all, have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, from a life where their children were being put to death to prevent them from multiplying, and yet they murmur constantly about the lovely food they had in Egypt, in comparison with the privations of the desert.

Are we grateful for the many gifts we enjoy, or do we, too, indulge in murmuring about our own privations?

Scientists and economists tell us that God provides enough each day to feed every mouth on earth, and yet we see the world’s resources stockpiled in the rich nations and scarce indeed in the poorer areas of the globe.

The excess manna which turned bad overnight and would have made those who took more than their share sick, carries with it a suggestion of Western problems with obesity and heart disease caused by over-abundance. Advertising is geared to encourage us to buy more and more to satisfy our desires, and yet perhaps we should ask ourselves more often, “What do I need?”, rather than “What do I want?”

Adequate food, shelter, warmth and love is what the human soul needs to thrive and is the God-given right of every person made in his image.

In our Gospel reading, we were assured that Jesus himself is the Bread of Life, the sustenance we need to sustain our souls: “I am the Bread of Life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” We have been given the ultimate gift of daily bread – the love of Christ to uphold, comfort and encourage us through life, and to offer us the promise that we shall be raised up at the last day.

In our gratitude for this gift of Bread and of Life, we are called to respond by sharing with others, insofar as we can, the daily bread of food, comfort, shelter and love which enable them to live lives of dignity and safety.

Christian theology is rooted in the concept of God’s Kingdom of peace and justice coming here on earth, as it is in heaven. We can do our part to bring in the kingdom, if we can give thanks for our daily bread, and do everything we can to ensure that those who share the kingdom with us have equal opportunities to receive the daily bread given for them.

Amen