

It's so good to be back home and to be back among all of you, my parish family. And thank you for your prayers for me. (While we were studying in DC, I joked with one of my friends that I better not fail my comprehensive exam - I would be far to embarrassed to face all the people I had asked to pray. But I didn't fail!)

I'm also thankful to return home because I feel like I'm just in time. Last week, we began a little break from the Gospel according to St. Mark that we hear at Sunday Masses throughout this liturgical year. Instead, Holy Mother Church gives us chapter six of the Gospel of St. John, which is probably my favorite chapter in all of the Bible. In this chapter, Jesus lays out for the people very clearly the most important gift that he would give to all of us - the gift of Himself in the Eucharist.

Last week, we heard how this all started: Jesus worked a great miracle; He multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish and turned them into enough food to feed a crowd of five thousand! And there were leftovers. Jesus provided for the people an abundance of miraculous food to satisfy their physical hunger.

Today, the theme shifts away from this physical food of barley loaves and fishes to something higher. The psalm response that we just sang sums it up perfectly: "The Lord gave them bread from heaven."

The first reading reminds us of the great gift God gave to His people in the desert. As he led them out of slavery in Egypt, the people were hungry and so they complained and grumbled against God. But as a generous Father, the Lord provided for them for forty years with quail and with the mysterious manna from the sky. The Jewish people never forgot this great sign that God had done for them. As they journeyed through the desert to the Promised Land, the Lord gave them bread from heaven.

The crowds in the Gospel today remembered this great miracle, too. After Jesus had fed them with the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, the people followed Him. And, Jesus used this as an invitation to call them to deeper faith - faith in Him. Jesus wanted them to believe that He is the One sent by the father, He is the One who can provide for every need. But before they would believe, they asked for a sign. And not just any sign, they asked Jesus to repeat the miracle of the manna. They wanted bread from heaven.

What a beautiful request they made! It was bold to be sure - to ask for another miracle right after the multiplication of loaves and fishes. But what a request! They wanted Jesus to do what the Lord had done for them—provide bread from heaven. They were so close to understanding.

They were looking for the bread from heaven that would give them life. And so Jesus tells them: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." The bread from Heaven that they were looking for was standing before them and talking to them!

The Lord has given us bread from heaven. His Son, Jesus Christ, is the Bread from heaven that comes down and gives life to the world. Jesus is the Bread that sustains us in this life. The Lord provided bread for His people in the desert as they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land. In the same way, God gives His son to be our Bread from Heaven. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us Himself to provide for us in our present journey to the Promised Land of Heaven.

Now, that beautiful image of the manna in the desert that is fulfilled in Jesus offers us a sign of what was to come, but it can also offer us a warning. As their time in the desert went on and on, the people grew tired of the manna. They even called it wretched food. The Lord gave them bread from heaven and they got tired of it. They stopped being thankful for the gift.

If we are not careful, this can happen to us, too. The gift of faith can grow old or burdensome. Even the Eucharist, so great a gift as it is, can become ordinary and boring. And here I am preaching to myself, too! As a priest, offering Holy Mass is the greatest gift I could ever hope to receive. But if I am not careful, if I don't make it a point to remain close to Christ in prayer, if I am not reverent and attentive to what I am doing during Mass, even this greatest gift could become boring and tedious and stale. I think it can be that way for any of us.

Jesus is the Bread of Life and He comes to us right there on the altar. But do we sometimes miss Him? Do we “zone out” or allow ourselves to entertain distractions? If so, let us simply be reminded of what a gift God has given us. God will never be outdone in generosity. The more that we enter fully into Holy Mass, the more we will receive from the Lord. Indeed, Christ Himself will transform us. As St. Paul says, The Lord will help us “put away the old self of your former way of life... and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.”

The Lord has given us Bread from heaven. Let us do all we can to remain thankful for this gift of the Eucharist. May we open our hearts to enter fully into this great worship of God so that He can transform our lives into greater holiness, so that the Bread from Heaven can satisfy our every need.