Corpus Christi “Manna from Heaven”

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At the heart of our Catholic worship is the Eucharist. We believe that Christ is fully present in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity. As we see in our first reading, the idea of God willing to feed His people isn’t new for us. For example, we hear in Deuteronomy, Moses telling the people, “Remember how for forty years now the LORD, your God, has directed all your journeying in the desert, so as to test you by affliction and find out whether or not it was your intention to keep his commandments. He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your fathers, in order to show you that not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD.”

And Moses’ words to the Hebrews thousands of years ago are equally as important to us today. Why? My friends, our whole lives, in a sense, can be understood as that desert of space and time where God has led us just as he has led the Hebrews. Life itself can be understood as a testing ground, a school of sorts, to teach us how to live in the eternity of God. And we have been given a basic rule to follow: to love God and to love our neighbor. If we perfect this we will have gained the skill sets necessary to enjoy heaven. But every one of us here knows how truly difficult it can be to truly love God and to truly love our neighbor.

Like any good school or training ground, our divine teacher doesn’t make the lesson plan easy for us. In order for us to learn how to live in the spirit life, we have to be confronted with all kinds of challenges, and sometimes even afflictions, so our teacher can see what we are made of. Just as we don’t learn very much from classes that give us the correct answer right away to every problem, we wouldn’t learn how to love God and love neighbor if God provided us with the answers all the time. God love is present to us all the time, however, sometimes it is tough love.

God doesn’t free the Hebrews and give the Promised Land right away, does he? God leads the Hebrews out of the slavery of self-complacency into a desert. Anyone who has recovered from addiction knows what this desert is like. And it can be any addiction: an addiction to nicotine, alcohol, drugs, gambling and so on, but it also can be an addiction to money, career, sex, ego gratification, and the list goes on. Once the chains of addiction are severed, it feels like being led into the desert, to a very harsh environment with little comfort or nourishment. When this happens, the sinner naturally wants nothing more than to run back to Pharaoh, right back into the chains that enslave us. You may remember in Exodus, that is exactly what happens. God frees the Hebrews from slavery, leads them into the purification of the desert, and what happens? The people start complaining asking Moses to lead them back to Pharaoh!
And so, my friends, in order to grow in the spirit life, God will lead us into the desert. Just like the Hebrews were led into the desert for a forty-year journey to the Promised Land, we are on our journey through space and time to the Kingdom of God. During this journey we will be tested and afflicted. And yes, there is the real danger that some may get lost along the way. No matter how difficult the journey through the desert can be, however, God will never leave us. Like a good teacher, God practices what He teaches by becoming a human being like us. Jesus teaches us by word and example how to love God and to love neighbor even through the greatest of adversity. Because we must experience suffering, Jesus taught us how to endure suffering. Because we must one-day experience death, Jesus taught us even how to die. More important than just a teacher, Jesus revealed himself to us as a savior by becoming our paschal sacrifice, saving us through his body and blood, so that we may one day rise with him to new life to eternal glory.

And so God gives the Hebrews manna from heaven as food for the journey as they traveled through the desert. As we cross the deserts in our life, we are also given bread from heaven, aren’t we? But this is not any ordinary bread. Jesus tells the crowds in the Gospel of St. John: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." Remember in Exodus how the Hebrews quarreled in one voice among themselves with Moses? It is therefore no coincidence that, here in the Gospel of St. John the crowd quarreled with one voice amongst themselves saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The way the narrative reads, it is as if we are right back in the Exodus with Moses and the Hebrews. There are only two times in scripture where the Hebrews quarreled in one voice in the desert, in Exodus with Moses and in the 6th chapter of John with Jesus. Read the 6th chapter of John therefore as a sequel to exodus with Jesus as the new Moses. Jesus says to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

And so, my friends, at the heart of our Catholic worship is the Eucharist, the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. As we travel through the sands of space and time, we are given food for the journey, manna from heaven in the Eucharist. Through adversity and through affliction, we learn what it means to become Christ-like. Because we know, no one can travel through the desert alone and survive; we have accepted our baptismal calling to caravan through this desert as Church, as one body of Christ. This Sunday we are challenged to consider how to live as a member of the Body of Christ. What are the challenges that keep us from growing deeper in discipleship? What are the areas in our life that tempt us to give up and run back to Pharaoh? What is one thing we can do this week to live our vocation as a Eucharistic people? When we receive the precious Body and Blood of the Lord at Mass today, name one thing you can do to become more Christlike to the people in your life. This is important thing to consider as we make our journey through life because when we worthily receive the Body of Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we are what we eat.