

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 18, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
True Bread and True Life

The Rev. Kent Higgins

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For our time together, in a sermon I have titled “True Bread and True Life,” let’s think about nourishment of body and soul, especially about bread, which is in all the readings. Obviously, “bread” means both the food we consume in order to sustain life, and the food with which we are fed at the altar.

In truth, most of us have – and consume – a great deal more of the former kind of bread than we need to. I certainly do! Yet in our own town, people go hungry.

The Episcopal Church is committed – at least at the level of General Convention – to supporting and implementing what are known as the M D Gs – Millennium Development Goals. At their heart, the M D Gs aim to reduce and eventually eliminate poverty, here and around the world. Part of that is, of course, feeding people adequately.

At some point, I will ask this church if we wish to help meet the Millennium Development Goals, but not this morning. This morning, I ask us to turn inward for a few minutes, and see how these readings apply in our lives.

The Old Testament lesson is part of the story of God's providing food for the Hebrew people on their journey to the land God had promised them. God leads the people out of slavery in Egypt, parting the Red Sea to allow his people to flee the Egyptian soldiers, just as he parts the river Jordan, so that they cross over into Canaan.

The physical food that God provides is manna. According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, "Manna received its name reportedly from the question the Israelites asked when they first saw it, "What is it?" or "manna [man nu]." Manna was given when Israel arrived in the wilderness of Sin and, along with occasional quail, was the only ...food ...the Israelites received during the forty years. In fact, the supply did not cease until the Israelites arrived at the border of Canaan [which is what we read about today]. The provision of manna was daily. The Lord promised to rain bread from heaven upon the ground. The people were instructed to gather it daily with the exception of the Sabbath. If they gathered too much, the remainder would spoil. Only on the sixth day were they permitted to gather a double portion.

"The provision was considered so miraculous that Moses commanded Aaron the high priest to ...place ...[some] in the ark of the covenant [so] that future generations might be reminded of the Lord's supply of bread to the great host of Israelites for forty years. In the New Testament, Paul called manna "spiritual" or "supernatural" food. Christ also compared himself with the bread that came down from heaven."¹

In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read "² Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble

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you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”²

In Luke’s Gospel, which we read just a few weeks ago, we hear Deuteronomy’s echo: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ” ³

And then in this morning’s Gospel, we have the younger son, who takes his share of the inheritance and squanders it. Out of money, the boy goes to work in a country far away from home, doing work he was never supposed to do. Finally, in desperation, he realizes he has done all the wrong things.

Finding himself hungry, he realizes that he has abandoned his true life – that his sin against his father has been one of pride and willfulness – doing that which he ought not to have done, and leaving undone those things he ought to have done.

The prodigal is truly bankrupt – he can do nothing for himself except go back to his father seeking mercy. God sustains the young man, and brings him

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home to a joyous reunion with his father – providing both food for his body and reconciliation for his soul.

You know that God sustains us in the same way, for without his grace we have nothing. Think about it for a moment. Remember the last thing you had to eat. Did you cause the food to exist? You may have worked at a job to earn money to buy it, or you may have grown it in your own garden on land you say you “own,” but you did not create the food, nor did you make it suitable to nourish your body. We are only temporary stewards of the land. It is all God’s gracious – which is to say un-earned – gift to us.

Shortly, we are going to approach God’s altar to be fed. We will eat “the body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” I know one priest who likes to say “the body of Christ, food for the journey.” We are on a journey through our lives, sometimes into the wilderness. But we are never alone.

We are the spiritual heirs of the Hebrew people, claimed by God to be his people, and ultimately given the incredible gift of the birth, life, death and resurrection of his son Jesus. As members of God’s Church, we are, as Saint Paul says in the Epistle, a new creation, entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation, that is to say, of bringing others to know the love of God.

It is not news to say that we stray from God’s ways. All people do. We are all like the prodigal, wanting our own way and wanting it now. Both the elder and younger son in the story of the prodigal miss the point of how much they are loved, and how much they have been given.

The prodigal’s return is like Easter will be at the end of Lent. In Lent’s remaining weeks, I challenge us to think and pray about our lives, and how they have been given to us by God, so that we can use them to serve others and to glorify God.

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Just relax. Sit quietly. Close your eyes if you wish. Take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. One more time. Within that inspiration, that breathing-in, feel the gift of life that God gives us. Savor that moment, for we cannot explain why it happens, why God chose to give us the gift of life. Our very lives are a sign of God's love for us, an outpouring of his grace, which we did nothing to earn. But God leaves to our discretion deciding what to do with his gift of life.

As you come forward to the altar to be fed by God, savor the bread. Know as you eat it that God is feeding you in spirit and in truth, giving you the power to spread his love to others in this word.

And as we are dismissed from this place, to go into the world to love and serve the Lord, make a fresh commitment to do exactly that. It is our obligation. It is why we are being fed. Jesus will be with us, through bad times and good, always at our sides. Feed on him, in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Love poems by George Herbert (1593-1633)

Love (3) by George Herbert *

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
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But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
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