

There is an intentional focus on food during this Lenten season: bread for the body. There is also an intentional focus on demons. To fight against the demons and win, we need more than bread for the body; we need bread for the soul. As we heard on the first Sunday in Lent, Jesus had been deprived of food for 40 days and nights. And when the devil tried to get Him to turn some stones into bread, He replied. “Man does live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Bread for the body, and spiritual bread – the Word of God – for the soul.

In today’s Gospel we see God’s recognition that, yes, man *does* live on bread, and *He* graciously provides it. But we also learn that man does not live on bread *alone*. And yet, tragically, the people in our Gospel wanted nothing but bread from Jesus. They did not know that He could offer them so much more.

Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds for a little while. He got into a boat with His disciples and crossed the sea to a deserted place. But the multitudes saw Him leave and left on foot to meet Him on the other side. John tells us why in v. 2: because they saw all the signs He was doing and they wanted to see more. Some of them arrived before Jesus did. Others kept coming. In Mark’s account he records that Jesus had compassion on

the people, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, wandering aimlessly, attracted by the signs Jesus did.

So, the other Gospels tell us that Jesus spent the rest of the day teaching the people and healing their diseases. When evening came, the disciples suggested that Jesus dismiss them so that they could go buy bread for themselves. They were not that far from town; there was no indication that they were too poor to buy themselves a meal, so they would have been all right. But Jesus had one more gift to give them. After all, as John tells us, Passover was near. Passover – and with it, the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

People's minds should have been fixed on that important annual celebration, just as most of us think about and plan for Christmas and hopefully also Easter, weeks in advance. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread: a reminder of God's physical providence in redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt, and of Moses leading them through the wilderness where God provided bread for them every day in the form of Manna. But the Passover was also a reminder of God's spiritual providence in His promise to redeem Israel by the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, the Prophet who is greater than

Moses, who offers the true Bread from heaven. And there it is again: bread for the body and bread for the soul.

First, Jesus tests Philip and the other disciples. “Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” He wanted Philip not to despair but to trust with hope that the One who asked the question had the power and the desire to provide the answer Himself.

Philip admitted the simple truth. We do not have the money. We cannot provide bread for all these people. Andrew then came and pointed out the extent of their ability. Five loaves of bread and two fish. Here is what we do have, Jesus, but human reason says it is not enough. Andrew does well to put the question back to Jesus. “What are they among so many?”

Then we have the miracle itself. The people sat down in groups of 50, which made it easy to count them all. Jesus gave thanks to the Father and started handing out bread and fish to disciples, and then the disciples gave what Jesus gave them to the multitudes. And the food just kept coming. All 5,000 ate their fill, with twelve baskets of broken pieces left over, “crumbs from the master’s table” with which to feed the poor afterwards.

So, yes, man does live on bread. But who provides it? Where does it come from? It comes from God; it comes from Jesus, the Son of God who

is true God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It comes from God usually through parents or through hard work. But God can also rain it down from heaven or multiply what is in the pantry, if that is how He has to keep His promise to provide for His people. Recognize the Giver. Recognize Jesus as the Giver. And receive your daily bread with thanksgiving. Receive it with gladness. Enjoy it while you have it, and share the leftover pieces with the poor and needy.

But recognize also that man does not live on bread alone. Go ahead and eat your bread. Eat it every day. Eat it for years to come. But you know very well that eating bread every day – taking care of your body, obeying every one of the doctor’s orders – still will not keep you alive on this earth for more than 70, 80, or 90 years. Your body is dying, no matter how healthy you are at the moment. You were conceived in your mother’s womb with an expiration date known only to God. You were conceived with death already programmed into your genes, not because of some evolutionary mechanism, but because of sin. Eating bread regularly just means prolonging the time until your death. Bread does nothing for your soul, for your eternal well-being.

Your soul, therefore, lives only on “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4), as Moses and Jesus said. God’s word is what

keeps your soul alive. It is God's Word which teaches about sin, your sin, and the sin of everyone else, and the sin that has corrupted even nature itself, the sin that will result in the death of your body. And God's Word teaches about His grace, His gracious plan of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, His gracious acceptance of all who believe in Christ, His gracious gift of His Holy Spirit to begin a new obedience in the Christian, His gracious help in bearing the cross each and every day, until you reach the goal of the undying life.

The multitudes in our Gospel today wanted bread alone, like most of the rest of the Jews, who wanted to stick with Hagar. They wanted to stick with "Jerusalem below," with the First Covenant of the Law instead of the Second Covenant of grace and of the Promise of forgiveness through Christ. The people in our Gospel believed that Jesus was the Prophet who was to come, but all they wanted and expected from the Christ was an earthly king to feed their bellies, an earthly king to fight their battles and give them a pleasant and glorious earthly life. As it says at the end of the Gospel, the people who ate the bread "were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king." This is the kind of Savior we want! We want a Savior who can give us bread for our bodies!

And so, as we learn from the rest of John 6, those very crowds walked away from Jesus the very next day when He insisted on offering them Himself, not as an earthly bread-king, but as the Bread from heaven who would give His very flesh and blood to reconcile them with God and bestow on them. He offered not an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly one.

Like those crowds, people today are happy to follow Jesus, that is, if it is the Jesus who feeds the poor, the Jesus who gives us a better life, the Jesus who makes us feel good. They are happy to have a Jesus who did not create the world and who does not demand an accounting for sin. They are happy to follow a Jesus who makes people behave better, a Jesus who works together with other religions to solve social problems, a Jesus who does not judge. *This* is the kind of Jesus the people of this world would have for a king.

But the real Jesus appeared, He taught that He is the Creator and the Judge, the very Son of God, who came to call poor sinners to repentance. He taught people to recognize their sins and to be terrified by the fiery judgment that awaits. The real Christ came to suffer the judgment we deserved for our sins and to offer forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in Him. The real Christ calls people to repent and be baptized, and to sit at the feet of the pastors whom He has sent, to be active in a church that

teaches His truth purely, to receive His very body and blood in His Sacrament, and to recognize His Word and Sacraments as the true food for your souls and as the source of a life that's so much bigger than what we can see here.

But that Jesus was not accepted then, and He still is not accepted today – not by most of the world, not even by most of our neighbors, not even by many churches that bear His name.

And so, our joyful Gospel of Jesus' compassion and providence for the 5,000 ends on a sad note, the note of a gift that was given and then squandered, a sign that was given and went unrecognized, a Savior who offered Himself to men who then turned away from Him because He offered more than they were willing to receive.

Do not look to follow their example. Look, instead, to God for daily bread and receive it with thanksgiving. But even more importantly, look to Christ for something better than bread. Look to Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Look to Him for life and salvation which He earned for you through His suffering and death, and which He now hands out for free in His Word and Sacraments. Look to Him who, in deep love for you, bore the punishment for your sins and rose from the dead to give you also the sure and certain hope of the resurrection in his name.

Then you will have the bread for your soul, the only real bread that counts for eternal life. Amen.