

Have you ever noticed how often the Bible sets a scene in the wilderness. We remember, for example, that just before he began his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. For the people of Jesus' time, this would have immediately reminded them of the forty years that the chosen people spent wandering in the wilderness. Always, the wilderness is a place of testing. People face challenges there. They can end up wandering aimlessly, not sure where they are going or when they will arrive.

This is the situation we find in the first reading from the Book of Exodus. If we go back before the scene in that reading, we remember that this people had been slaves in Egypt. Life had been extremely difficult for them there, so they cried to God for help, and he led them through the Red Sea to freedom. Now, in today's reading, in this barren, lifeless desert they became restless and angry. They blamed Moses and Aaron for bringing them to this wilderness with no food. They looked back at their time in Egypt and said that they would have been better to stay there. Notice what is going on here! They are in a state of deep forgetfulness. They forgot what life was really like in Egypt, and they were creating an illusory image of a false paradise that they wanted to return to. We could say that they didn't know what they were looking for. Their desires were distorted. But they had also forgotten God. They had forgotten that God had heard their cry in Egypt and had led them out.

Now, in the wilderness, God once again hears their cry. This time it is a cry for food. God gives them food – but not like any food they had seen before. This was bread from heaven. And God said that he would give it to them every day. Each day, they should collect just what they needed for that day. Two things strike me as important here. The first is that this command was probably putting them to the test – testing whether they could overcome the instinct to take more than they needed. You can imagine how they might have even begun to fight each other for a share of the food. But God said there will be enough food; just take what you need for today. The second thing flows from this, and it is that they could only follow this command if they trusted God – if they trusted that tomorrow God would once again rain down bread from heaven. They would need to trust God every day.

When they saw the food given by God, they realised it was like nothing they had seen before. They asked the question, "What is that?" It is a simple question, but an important one. It was

in fact the very question that the crowd who followed Jesus in the gospel did not ask. Jesus challenged them because they were following him just so that they could have more of the bread he had given them, but they failed to recognise the sign. They failed to ask the question, “What is that?” The food that Jesus had given when he blessed and distributed the loaves and the fish, was a sign of something deeper. It was a sign of God’s gift – a gift that gives life to the world.

As they question Jesus further, he answers the question, “What is that?” He tells them that it is the bread of life and that this bread gives life to the world. Then he tells them that he himself is the bread of life and whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never thirst. What he is asking of them is like what God asked of the people in the wilderness when he told them to take just what they needed for that day and to trust that God would provide for tomorrow and for the day after and for the day after. To believe in Jesus is to trust him.

I think we can be both challenged and encouraged by this teaching. It can be challenging when we realise that often our raw, unreflected desires and wants do not always bring happiness and are not always the way to growth in the spiritual life. The encouraging message is that God hears us when we call to him and that he answers our needs. More importantly, he answers our needs in a way that we might never have imagined, so that our true longing and desire are fulfilled. All he asks is that we trust him – even when we think he has abandoned us. Growth in the spiritual life requires perseverance. It requires that we see and heed the sign.

That, of course, is what we do each week as we celebrate the Eucharist. Here is God’s gift. Here is God’s answer to our needs. Here is Jesus the bread of life. May we seek that bread always.