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What does Jesus mean when he says he's the bread of life?

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 10, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

What shall we do? What are the works that God wants us to do? This question is supremely important, as you might imagine, trying to know what God wants us to do, and as we listen to our scriptures today, I think we will find clearly what God wants us to do, and then we must pray that we respond and do the works God wants.

To get an idea of what is going to have to happen, what works we need to do, we must listen, again, for a moment, to our second lesson today, because it's here that the work, or the outcome of that work, is declared. Paul was saying to those Christians at Ephesus, people whom he had preached to, converted and baptized, "I say to you, and with insistence I advise you, do not imitate the pagans who live an aimless kind of life. It is not for this that you have been baptized and have followed Christ. You must give up your former way of living, the old self, whose deceitful desires bring self-destruction. Renew yourselves spiritually from inside, put on the new self, the self according to God, which is created in true righteousness and holiness."

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15

Psalms 78: 3-4, 23-24, 25, 54

Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24

John 6: 24-35

Full text of the readings [1]

Paul is saying we must undergo a revolution within ourselves, put on a new self. The words that he uses are very strong. He's really calling for something that would almost turn us inside-out, upside-down, just change everything in our lives, a revolution, so that we really live in God and renew ourselves from inside, according to God's ways.

Now the Gospel lesson helps us to really understand what this is all about, what this renewal is about, this revolution that has to go on. When you go to that Gospel lesson, the part where Jesus is carrying on the discussion with the people who find him after they discover that only one boat is gone and he's not around, and the people are gone. They find him in Capernaum and ask, "Well, when did you come here?" But Jesus right away challenges them, "I say to you, you look for me, not because you have seen the signs, but because you ate bread and were satisfied. Work then, not for perishable food, but for the lasting food which gives eternal life. This is the food that the Son of Man gives to you, for God has put God's seal on him."

Jesus is saying they saw that food as food, and they were happy to get it, and they figure they can get all kinds of things from Jesus now, this miracle worker. Jesus is saying, "No, no. That's not what it was about." It really is a sign, Jesus wants them to realize, a sign which tells who Jesus is. The event in the desert is not just an historical event, and there are different versions of it, so we really are not clear exactly what happened, but the main thing is, as John points out, it was a sign -- a sign telling us who Jesus is.

Throughout John's Gospel, this is a common thing that John uses to teach us. He's already had one of the signs -- the sign of the wedding in Cana and Galilee, where Jesus is revealed as a God, because he participates in this banquet that is a sign of the heavenly banquet, how a final life, of complete joy, with God will be. But there are many, many signs in John's Gospel. In fact, you may remember at Easter time, when we read the very end of John's Gospel: "There are many other signs that Jesus gave in the presence of his disciples, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Believe and you will have life through his name."

These signs are recorded -- this sign that we just read about and all the others -- "that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Believe and you will have life through his name." That's exactly what Jesus says to the people he's carrying on a discussion with, when he's saying look beyond just that food that you ate the other day; see the sign. So then they ask, "What shall we do? What are the works that God wants us to do?" If we see the sign, what are we going to do? "The work God wants is this: that you believe in the one whom God has sent." That's the work God wants: "Believe in the one whom God has sent."

By belief, faith, we're not talking about simply giving assent to a list of doctrines, the trinity, the incarnation, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the ascension; these are all doctrines, and yes, they are attempts to articulate, to put in human words, these profound mysteries about God, but that's not really faith, giving assent to those doctrinal articulations of God's mystery. Faith is entering into a relationship with God. Faith is becoming aware of the gift of our existence as a gift from God; nothing we've ever earned. God has loved us into being and sustains us in being, and we need to recognize that, and then to develop a relationship with this living God.

So what Jesus is asking of these people now is to do this work, believe in Jesus, the one whom God has sent, develop a relationship with Jesus, come to know him. Let him know you in quiet prayer, experience his presence. Deepen your awareness of who he is, the way of life that he lived, that he shows us, that is revealing God to us, because Jesus is, as he says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, who believes in me shall never be thirsty."

By bread of life, Jesus means the teaching that he is, by what he says, how he acts, and in fact, who he is, the Word of God. Jesus is the Word spoken by God, who reveals God to us in the most complete way possible, that we come to know God when we hear this Word who is Jesus, accept that Word into our minds, our hearts, our spirit, and let that Word begin to change us. When we enter into a relationship with God through Jesus, just as a relationship with any other person, it will change us, so that's what will happen if we believe in Jesus and accept him as the one that God has sent, the one who reveals God to us.

That's how we begin to undergo this revolution in our minds and hearts, our spirit. We begin because we come to know Jesus, as St. Paul says in writing to the church at Philippi, "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus," this mind, this attitude, this heart. So we must begin to take into ourselves the thinking of Jesus, the attitudes of Jesus, the way of acting of Jesus. That means then taking on the value system of Jesus.

Where do we find those? Throughout the whole Gospel. But if you want a summary of what is the value system of Jesus, we can go back to what we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel, especially the beatitudes that begin Chapter 5 of Luke's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount. "When Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain, sat down and his disciples gathered around him, and he spoke and began to teach them: Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice ..." and so on -- those eight beautiful beatitudes, ways to be blessed, to find fullness of life.

It's very challenging to have poverty of spirit -- "Blessed are the poor" -- which means we recognize that all that we have is gift from God. We talk about, "Well, I've earned this," but ultimately we were loved into being by God. All of creation is given to the whole human race by God. It's all gift, and if we recognize that, we will not

try to hang on to things for ourselves. That's what we mean by living the poverty of spirit of Jesus. Or thirst for justice -- God made the world for everybody, not just for a few. Everyone has a right to a full human life by having access to the resources that God has given for all, and yet we have so many ways in which it seems to end up with, so few have so much; so many have so little. That's the world in which we live, that's what our country is becoming. That's not justice. We need to work to change that.

That's a challenge, to try to find the way that everyone can benefit from the goods that are given for all. Hunger and thirst for justice. Meekness, not being arrogant in our relationships, as individuals, as a nation. Blessed are the peacemakers, those who are quick to work for reconciliation and forgiveness and love and bring peace as Jesus did, when he came to the disciples on Easter Sunday night. He breathed on them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. The sins you forgive, they are forgiven. The evil you restrain, it is restrained." Jesus is saying, "Bring about reconciliation. That's what I came for. Work for peace."

Sometimes as we do this, we even suffer persecution for justice sake, but that's part of following Jesus. He was put to death because he was struggling to make the reign of God happen, and yet even in his dying, he was pouring forth love on the whole world, on all of the human race of all times. "When I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself," Jesus proclaimed. His love is strong enough to transform everything into the reign of God, but that has to happen as we take that love into ourselves and carry out what Jesus himself says that sums up everything, "My one commandment, love one another as I have loved you," unconditionally, without reservation and without limit, continue to love. That is the way of Jesus.

So if we really accept what the Gospel says when Jesus declares today that he is the bread come down from heaven, the bread that feeds our spirit life, feeds our souls, not our bodies, that's what Jesus is as the bread of heaven. Jesus gives to us those gifts of wisdom and understanding, right judgment and courage. These are the gifts that come to us when we relate closer to Jesus, deepen our relationship.

The challenge is there for us today. We want to do the work that God wants us to do. That work is believe in the one whom God has sent, listen to him, follow him, deepen your relationship with him, and then that revolution will take place within you and more and more, each of us will become like Jesus and we will be filled with the food that gives us everlasting life. "Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry. Whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty." Not just for ordinary food or drink, but for that deep food of everlasting life -- food of the spirit that Jesus can give to us, that will revolutionize each of us and will change our world. We pray that we can hear God's word and take it into ourselves and follow it.

[Homily given at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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