

Tomorrow's Bread

Dr. Justo L. González



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Scripture References: Dt. 8:11-18; Rev. 7:9-12; 1 John 3

It is at the end of their pilgrimage through the desert that Moses warns the people of Israel: "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God ... who brought you out of the land of Egypt ... who led you through the great and terrible wilderness ... who fed you in the wilderness with manna."

Manna, the bread from heaven, is bread for the wilderness.

It did not come to the children of Israel at an easy time. It did not even come at a time of great faith. On the contrary, it came at a time of a double crisis – the crisis of hunger and the crisis of lack of faith.

God had performed wonders in the land of Egypt. God had led the people out of Egypt. God had saved them from the wrath of Pharaoh's army. Now they were hungry and disheartened. They asked Moses: Is this why you led them out of the land of Egypt, so that we might starve in the desert? We saw a mighty act of God back then. But now, God seems to have disappeared. Would it not be best to go back to Egypt?

It is to such a people, to a people in crisis, even to a doubting people, that God gives the manna.

The manna that God gives them is both food for the day and a promise for the morrow. It is food to keep them on their pilgrimage through the seemingly endless wilderness. But it is also food that reaffirms the promise that the God who led them out of Egypt will lead them into the Promised Land; that the God who led them across the Red Sea will lead them across the Jordan; that the wilderness is temporary; that the promise still holds.

Ever since, the people of Israel have celebrated the Passover meal in remembrance that the God who saved them and their children on that awesome Passover night was also the God who fed them in the wilderness, and the God who had guided them to the Land of Promise.

No matter how overwhelmed the people felt, how much they were tempted to doubt the promises of God, once a year they would gather for a meal, and break bread in remembrance that even in the wilderness God gives food to sustain a pilgrim people in their march to the Promise. In the wilderness of exile, in the wilderness of renewed foreign oppression, in the wilderness of captivity, the people would break bread; and in the breaking of that bread God would once again renew the Promise, and renew their faith, and feed their souls.

It was in the midst of such a wilderness, and on such a Passover celebration, that the Lord Jesus took bread. It was a wilderness of agonizing anxiety: "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup

from me.” It was the wilderness of unwarranted self-assurance: “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” It was the wilderness of disappointment: “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you three times deny that you love me.” It was the wilderness of betrayal: “One of you will betray me.” It was the wilderness of self-doubt: “Is it I, Lord?”

In the midst of such wilderness, as God had done generations before in the desert, Jesus feeds his people. “The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said: ‘This is my body, which is for you.’”

This was to be food for the journey. Manna in the wilderness that was to come. Manna in the wilderness of persecution. Manna in the wilderness of exile from the synagogues. Manna in the many wildernesses through which his people would have to go.

But, as was also the case of the manna in the desert, this bread which he took and gave us is also a bread of promise. In that very first communion he promised his disciples that he would drink wine with us in the Kingdom. Commenting on that, Paul says “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”

Until he comes. Until he comes his people must live in the wilderness. Until he comes, no matter how settled we might seem to be, we are a pilgrim people. Until he comes, we must live off the bread he provides for the march, and off the promise which this bread signifies.

As 1 John puts it: “We are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope will purify themselves, just as he is pure.”

We are already God's children. We have seen God's victory in the Exodus and on Easter morning. But we live in the in-between time of the wilderness. Meanwhile, while we wait for the promise, this bread which we break is both food for the march and a sign of the promise. It is bread for today; and it is also bread which celebrates and anticipates the morrow, when God's Kingdom shall come and God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

John correctly says that “all who have this hope will purify themselves.” In the wilderness, God gave Israel laws for life in the Promised Land. Even in the wilderness, Israel was to live as those destined to live on that land. In our wilderness, while we are still pilgrims, God gives us glimpses of that Kingdom which is our hope, of that Kingdom when we shall eat and drink with our Lord.

One of those glimpses is this bread which we break. Jesus himself spoke of the heavenly banquet which we anticipate today – or rather, which he anticipates for us today: “people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will sit at table in the kingdom of God.”

Or, as John the Seer put it: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the

Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb'."

This is our future. This is the Promised Land to which God is leading us. This is the Promise towards which we march even though our many wildernesses.

Just as God in the wilderness gave Israel laws that were signs of the Promise, so does God now in our wilderness give us signs of the future towards which we are marching—or rather, of the future for which God is preparing us.

One such sign is this meal. It is a sign and a promise of the day when "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will sit at the table in the kingdom of God."

If such is our future. If our future, as John says, will be to praise and worship God and the Lamb as one multitude, from all nations and languages, what does that say about our present? What does it say about a present when we allow our worship to be divided by levels of income, by class, by culture, by language, by prejudice, by what we find comfortable or uncomfortable, beautiful or jarring? Is our worship, is our life as a church, preparing us for that day when the shall come from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, all the peoples of the earth will join in a joyful banquet, and all the tongues of the universe will sing the same song?

Or, put it another way, how does this bread and the banquet it promises help us understand what is happening today, in our very own communities? Human communities are changing throughout the world. In Peru there is a President of Japanese descent. In South Africa Boers and Zulus have to learn how to live together. In our own communities right here in the US, we hear a multitude of languages that were not heard a few years ago; we see people dressed in garb that we used to see only in the movies; as dinner time approaches we smell not only roast beef and potatoes, but also garlic and curry powder.

It is possible to see all of this as a threat to our well-being and to the stability of our communities. In many ways it may well be. Life in today's world where cultures interact and mingle is not as easy as it used to be when each culture kept to its boundaries, and we did not have to deal with people that were different from ourselves.

But then this bread, and its promise, and John's vision, lead us to view these events under a totally different light. Could it be, could it just be, that in all these events God is giving us a chance to prepare for that day when we shall be part of that great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples? Could it be that in the variety of languages and rhythms we hear around us God is preparing us so that we may be part of that throng singing the praise of God and the Lamb? Could it be that in the variety of smells and culinary traditions we experience God is announcing the day when people will come from the east and from the west, and from the north and from the south, and sit at table in the Kingdom

of God?

If so, as we partake of this bread, let it become for us nourishment for the present, as we seek to march towards the future God is promising. And let us rejoice in that, as John says, “We are already children of God. And what we are to be has not yet been revealed.”

