

לֶחֶם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

Ex 16:1-35

1 Setting out from Elim, the whole community of Israelites entered the desert of Sin, lying between Elim and Sinai – on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left Egypt.

2 And the whole community of Israelites began complaining about Moses and Aaron in the desert 3 and said to them, ‘Why did we not die at the Lord’s hand in Egypt, where we used to sit round the flesh pots and could eat to our heart’s content! As it is, you have led us into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!’

4 The Lord then said to Moses, ‘Look, I shall rain down bread for you from the heavens. Each day the people must go out and collect their ration for the day; I propose to test them in this way to see whether they will follow my law or not. 5 On the sixth day, however, when they prepare what they have brought in, this must be twice as much as they collect on ordinary days.’

6 Moses and Aaron then said to the community of Israelites, ‘This evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, 7 and tomorrow morning you will see the glory of the Lord, for the Lord has heard your complaints about Him. What are we, that your complaint should be against us?’ 8 Moses then said, ‘This evening the Lord will give you meat to eat, and tomorrow morning bread to your heart’s content, for the Lord has heard your complaints about Him. What do we count for? Your complaints are not against us, but against the Lord.’

9 Moses then said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole community of Israelites, “Approach the Lord’s presence, for He has heard your complaints.”’ 10 As Aaron was speaking to the whole community of Israelites, they turned towards the desert, and there the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11 The Lord then spoke to Moses and said, 12 ‘I have heard the Israelites’ complaints. Speak to them as follows, “At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will have bread to your heart’s content, and then you will know that I am the Lord your God.”’

13 That evening, quails flew in and covered the camp, and next morning there was a layer of dew all round the camp. 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the desert was something fine and granular, as fine as hoarfrost on the ground. 15 As soon as the Israelites saw this, they said to one another, ‘What is that?’ not knowing what it was. ‘That’, Moses told them, ‘is the food which the Lord has given you to eat. 16 These are the Lord’s orders: Each of you must collect as much as he needs to eat – a homer per head for each person in his tent.’

17 The Israelites did this. They collected it, some more, some less. 18 When they measured out what they had collected by the homer, no one who had collected more had too much, no one who had collected less had too little. Each had collected as much as he needed to eat.

19 Moses then said, ‘No one may keep any of it for tomorrow.’ 20 But some of them took no notice of Moses and kept part of it for the following day, and it bred maggots and smelt foul; and Moses was angry with them. 21 Morning by morning they collected it, each man as much as he needed to eat, and once the sun grew hot, it melted away.

22 Now, on the sixth day they collected twice the amount of food: two homer per person, and all the leaders of the community came and told Moses this. 23 Moses replied, ‘This is what the Lord said, “Tomorrow is a day of complete rest, a Sabbath sacred to the Lord. Bake what you want to bake, boil what you want to boil; put aside what is left over, to be kept for tomorrow.” 24 So, as Moses ordered, they put it aside for the following day, and its smell was not foul nor were there maggots in it. 25 ‘Eat it today,’ Moses said, ‘for today is a Sabbath for the Lord; you will find none

in the fields today. 26 For six days you will collect it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none.'

27 On the seventh day some of the people went out to collect it, but they found none. 28 The Lord then said to Moses, 'How much longer will you refuse to obey my commandments and laws? 29 Look, the Lord has given you the Sabbath; this is why He give you two days' food on the sixth day; each of you must stay in his place; on the seventh day no one may leave his home.' So on the seventh day the people rested.

31 The House of Israel named it 'manna'. It was like coriander seed; it was white and its taste was like that of wafers made with honey.

32 Moses then said, 'These are the Lord's orders: Fill a homer with it and preserve it for your descendants, so that they can see the bread on which I fed you in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt.' 33 Moses then said to Aaron, 'Take a jar and in it put a full homer of manna and store it in the Lord's presence, to be kept for your descendants.' 34 Accordingly, Aaron stored it in front of the Testimony, to be preserved, as the Lord had ordered Moses.

35 The Israelites ate manna for forty years, up to the time they reached inhabited country: they ate manna up to the time they reached the frontiers of Canaan. 36 A homer is one-tenth of an ephah.

Ex 16,1-35

COMPLAINING / GRUMBLING

From its very beginning, the Israelite's journey in the desert is marked by fatigue, weakness, lack of conviction and trust, which come to the surface as soon as the first difficulties loom on the horizon.

The Israelite community grumble against Moses and Aaron, blaming them for the exodus from Egypt into the desert, '*to starve this entire assembly to death*'.

In their view, what the Lord did for them is to be attributed just to human reasons, to the strong personalities of their leaders, and even to their supposedly deadly projects. They do not recognize God's will any longer, just Moses and Aaron's; they do not recognize any longer God's wish to lead His people to the mountain of its inheritance, but rather Moses and Aaron's wish to lead the people towards death. This view arouses Moses' reaction, who defends himself: *What do we count for? Your complaints are not against us, but against the Lord.*' (Ex 16:8)

And again, in Chapter 17: '*Why take issue with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?*' (Ex 17:2)

This people did not trust the Lord at all. After receiving the command of collecting manna, a homer per head, and not to keep any for the following day, some people disobeyed Moses and kept part of it nonetheless.

And again, after being told that on the seventh day (the Sabbath) there would be no manna, some of them went out to collect it nonetheless and, of course, could not find any.

The lack of trust in the Lord and in the mediators that He chooses is always present during the journey.

The temptation to do one's own will, to trust in one's own experience, in one's own ideas and certainties, comes to the surface all the time.

All the time they are incapable of properly understanding their own history – in their view, Egypt is the pot of flesh, Egypt is equal to eating bread to one's heart's content, and it is not the land of slavery. They are incapable of properly reading their own past as well as their present. Their lack of trust comes to the surface: they are incapable of entrusting themselves to a future that they do not know, to a promise which is already supported by great signs and wonders and therefore should be credible.

Every day they have to collect manna. But everyday they have also to rebuild trust, to rekindle hope, to find new strength and improve their motivations. Every day it is as if they should go out of Egypt once again; every day it is as if they should listen to the 'new word' which can make them free. Moses and Aaron have to do with a people that everyday will have to learn how to be free: during the forty years that they will spend in the desert, as well as on each and every day of their future life in the promised land.

In a sense, the mediator must be clothed in patience. He has to welcome weakness. Every day he has to give them a new strength. Everyday he has to start afresh with those who have been entrusted to him, without becoming disheartened, without losing sight of the origin of his as well as of his people's history, but entrusting himself to a word which is not his and which will make them free.

Above all, the mediator, he who is leading God's people to God, through God, must be capable of bearing with the frustration of a faith which is continually lost, of lives which are suspicious of freedom, of growth which seem never to come to full maturity, of a fraternity which is all the time under the threat of individualism, of the lack of trust, of disobedience, of the search for easy solutions, of the nostalgia for what is familiar and seems to be safe.

The mediator is neither better than the others nor above the others, nor immune to the ideas of the rest of his people; but he is the one who knows who God is; he is the one who knows what to gaze at while going through a crisis, who knows where light comes from in the days of gloom, and who directs all his life to it. And therefore, he can be the leader of his people.

Moses' relationship to his people is made up of both distance and proximity, of anger and irritation providing instruction and of welcoming compassion at the same time; but, above all, it is made up of intercession with God on the people's behalf and of revelation of His word to them. He is like an empty and transparent channel, letting his people's cry go up to God in all its fullness and power, as well as letting God's healing word go down to his people.

He is just a channel, which lets water freely flow. But water is not his. The mediator is the one who utterly belongs to God and at the same time utterly belongs to his people too. He does not know whether he belongs to the earth or to Heaven; and whether he has to dwell in Heaven or on earth.

Anybody who has to lead a community is aware of this poverty and solitude, which – with time – will lead him to bloom to full maturity, to become a better man and a better believer, a better disciple, a man more and more capable of entrusting and consigning himself to God, a man capable of losing his own life in order to live

Somebody Else's life, or some other people's lives. And thus he will become wholly His.

DEW FROM HEAVEN

The dew is on the ground, but it comes from Heaven: the source of the dew is in Heaven. It is the symbolic image of a love relationship based on gratuitousness: it always falls, as a sign of unconditioned, permanent love, continually renewed on God's part.

*I shall fall like dew on Israel,
he will bloom like the lily,
and thrust out roots like the cedar of Lebanon.
(Hos 14:6)*

The dew is a very weak, delicate sign: the morning sun makes it vanish; still, it makes the earth fertile. Where there is dew, life can blossom.

The manna is **לֶחֶם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם**, *lehem min haššāmāyim*, the bread from Heaven, the gratuitous bread received by those who are nourished by God's care, by those who do not have to labour in order to earn a living. And which is given just because of God's gratuitousness. Thanks to this fact, the entire existence can enter a spiritual dimension, made of trust and abandon, welcome and thanksgiving.

The 'manna eater', the man this gift is addressed to, is the one who knows that this is a daily gift, a gift that will definitely come, and which is not only enough to live on but also suitable to one's own taste and beneficial to one's own life.

He is the 'poor man', the *ptochós*, of the evangelical beatitude:

"How blessed are the poor in spirit: the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." (Mt 5:3)

Let us discuss this theme in some depth. In Greek thought the poor can be defined with two different terms: **πένης** *pénes* and **πτωχός** *ptochós*.

πένης *pénes* is the poor man who owns some goods and who can make ends meet. And he has to employ the little he owns in order to survive.

He has to endure a miserable existence. He has to labour all day long to earn a meagre living. He has always to save some money from his little earnings, thinking about his future and the future of his family... He cannot waste any money, or else he will not have the money to buy food or medicines.

πτωχός *ptochós* renders into Greek the Hebrew term **עֲנִי**, '*ānî*, he-who-is-dependent-on another par excellence. **עֲנִי**, '*ānî* refers primarily to a relationship, not

to a destitute condition. He is the little one, but with reference to somebody else who is greater than him and who comes first. It is nearly always accompanied by אֲבִיּוֹן *'ebyôn*, which reinforces its meaning: the poor and needy, אֲנִי וְאֲבִיּוֹן *'ānī w^e'ebyôn*, where אֲבִיּוֹן *'ebyôn* means 'beggar', that is, he who is poor and begs, the poor who wishes to receive life from another. It corresponds to the Italian word 'pitocco'.

πτωχός *ptochós* conveys then the idea of an absolute lack of a source of livelihood, compelling the poor to invoke help from somebody else.

πτωχός *ptochós* is the one who needs another,
and does not have the means to survive.
(Marcus Aurelius)

The lot of a πτωχός *ptochós* is not to possess anything,
the lot of a πένης *pénes* is having to survive on very meagre earnings.
The latter is not the 'poor' of the beatitudes.

Poverty as a beatitude does not mean that you have some money – either a lot or very little – to administer.

It means that you have nothing to administer.
Being poor means that you utterly depend on another.
The meaning of life,
all material things,
every thought,
every word,
and your whole life depends on Another.

Poverty means passing from the conscious or unconscious attempt to possess the gift that we receive, to possess its spaces, its times, its object, to a gratuitous gift

which shares without calculating,
which gives without preparation, spontaneously.
It is love spontaneously received,
which therefore knows how to say 'Thank you!'

The poor man of the beatitudes knows that whatever he has to live on comes from others, comes from Another, and therefore he is ready to give thanks for everything.

Manna is then the pedagogy thanks to which we can live in this poverty, made of trust in the One who cares for us, and who will give us bread at the right time and the necessary water, the One who will not let either our sandals or our mantles wear out during the journey, because He is the Lord (cf Dt 29:4).

The manna-eater knows that he is receiving his life from another and accepts that, becoming aware of the gift every day and giving thanks in his turn every day.

WHAT IS THAT?

As soon as the Israelites saw this, they said to one another, 'What is that?'
Ex 16,15

This is a perfectly legitimate question. I am in front of something which I do not know and ask what it is. However, this question has also a deeper meaning.

According to rabbinical thought, manna is the sign of this very explicit question.

In the line, "they said to one another, 'What is that?'" , given that they did not know what it was. And Moshè told them: 'This is the bread, etc'.

His explanation is that the very fact that they did not know what it was, is the bread commanded by the Lord. In fact, the aim of knowledge is to recognize that we are unable to know. All the wanderings of the children of Israel in the desert were similar to that. 'Your coming after me [in the desert] in a land which had not been sown...'

(Sfat Emet)

Through the manna God is trying to make aware His people that they are unable to know. They do not know what manna is, they do not know if they have a future.

According to rabbinical thought, in Egypt the Israelites became slaves of knowledge, above all. A slave knows the times, the rations of food, how much work he has to do to produce the set amount of bricks with a fixed amount of material.

The passage from slavery to freedom is equal to becoming aware that there are things that we do not know. Egypt's system of power is being censured as soon as Moses appears on the stage. And Pharaoh who foresees trouble reacts by saying: *'I know nothing of the Lord'* (Ex 5:2)

Pharaoh knows nothing... He cannot acknowledge the Lord, he does not understand the Lord; and consequently he faces Him with a closed mind.

On the contrary, the people of Israel's answer is: we do not know, we do not understand, but we listen to Him and do what is requested from us. In fact, they entrust themselves to the Lord.

Our constant exodus from Egypt is possible when, in spite of all that we know, we become aware that we do not know much, and therefore we open ourselves up to a Word which can make us grow, teach, and which can illuminate our path, a path which we do not know and which we would be unable to find on our own.

To be on an 'exodus' means to go out of what we suppose to know, and to enter what we still do not know, and to be nourished by that and thanks to that. In this freedom, which is the freedom of those who do not know anything, we can open up

our hearts to welcome the living God's word, and we can acknowledge it as the only one capable of bringing us novelty and giving us life.

In the Liturgy of the Hours for the Feast of St Benedict, we find the following line: Benedict 'went out of this world with the ignorance typical of the knowledgeable and the wisdom of those who do not want to know'. This is what can nourish each and every journey similar to the Exodus, what gives the right direction to the paths (to both those that we have already trodden and those that we have still to tread), what can support us on the way.

The manna-eater is then the one who, in spite of having already experienced God, is still capable of being surprised by Him, and of letting Him act freely and impressively. He is the one who, in spite of having already experienced God, does not project himself on Him interpreting His Will in everything according to his own will, but the one who lets everything teach himself a new measure according to God's Will.

This needs readiness to obey. And life, which revolves around the 'pot of flesh', must be ready to face the empty spaces of the desert, the new horizons of the promises, the future that is still unknown, all of which must be filled with the certainty that God is coming to visit us.

In our fraternities life often revolves around the pot of flesh, that is, around what can guarantee our survival, around what we know and what is enough for us. We resist God's free and unforeseeable deeds by our pseudo-common sense, which we deem to be the fruit of experience. And, when we say 'we have always done so', we do not realize that we are not marching any longer. On the contrary, we must step back and leave room for God to act; we must leave room for His unpredictability, for His gestures and words which do not suit to our tastes, which might look even 'ethnic' or 'exotic'... And we too must ask: What is that?

In fact, it is perfectly legitimate to ask. But it must not be the question of someone who is prejudiced and suspicious of everything that he does not know, and ready to object to it; but the question of someone who is willing to learn, to listen, to follow what he does not know yet, understanding that all those things are given to him every day, as much as he needs, in order for him to become a better man, a free man.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

1) The passage dealing with manna is very important because it is the subtext of Jesus' speech in the synagogue of Capernaum (St John's Gospel, chapter 6). I think you should re-read Jn 6 in the light of this Lectio, keeping in mind that all that we have, has been gratuitously given to us. We must receive it with an attitude of 'poverty', not according to our own 'measure' but with trust and abandon. St John's text is concluded by Jesus' question: "What about you, do you want to go too?" (Jn 6:67) This question summarizes all attempts to disengage ourselves from God's gift and its consequent responsibility, to disengage ourselves from change which is necessary for us to be able to welcome the gift.

St Peter's profession of faith is the answer: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). St Peter shows that he has no other food, no other reason to live but this.

I hope you may cement this essential and vital relationship with the Lord.

2) The passage dealing with manna has to do with fraternal relations too: the gift that one has received must be shared, and the gift is just for today and not for tomorrow. This teaches us to live in the present and for the present.

It teaches us patience and gratuitousness when we walk together: we must be patient and wait for the fruit to grow and mature. But nothing can be taken for granted.

It teaches us to cherish each and every word of the Lord, and to trust in it, without resorting to more familiar and already experienced paths, "safer" just because we know them.

3) I think that you should also ponder on the mediator. I do not have much to add to what I have already said in the Lectio. However, I would like to highlight that if I have been entrusted with a service, I have to serve, not to lord it over all the rest: in fact, we do not have the power to make one hair white or black (Mt 5:36). Very often there is a great disproportion between what we have sown and what we can harvest. Therefore, we need to be really merciful, and be aware of our own shortcomings as well as other people's. We need to be really compassionate, to love gratuitously, to be willing to start afresh all the time with a new and attentive love, which is never fed up with supporting, encouraging, showing the way and accompanying others on it.