

## Homily – Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Whenever I have occasion to think back on my childhood, usually to share a story with my own children about “the good old days” and “the way things used to be”, one of my fondest memories is the smell of homemade bread cooking in the oven. Many days I would arrive home from school to freshly baked loaves of bread coming out of the oven and cooling on the kitchen countertop. As I think about it, I would happily substitute that bread, combined with her homemade strawberry jam for supper any day of the week today.



I come from a large family of 7 children, and with only one income, homemade things were more of a necessity than a treat. It’s almost comical to think of how many times we would complain because we couldn’t bring “store bought bread” sandwiches to school in our lunches instead of the homemade stuff. Just another, in a long list of examples of the idiocy of my youth. What I wouldn’t give today to have just one slice of that bread Mom used to make.

Looking back, I never gave much thought to how our complaining would have affected my mom after her many hours of hard work put in to provide food for those who were her own. The baking, the cooking, the cleaning were ways for her to express her love for her family, that were just as heartfelt as the verbal “I love you’s”. Maybe more.

With that thought in mind I look at our readings this week. When we pick up the Exodus story in our First reading, we hear that the whole congregation of the children of Israel were complaining against Aaron and Moses. And why wouldn’t they? I mean all he has done (with God’s help) is negotiate their freedom with a tyrannical Pharaoh; part the waters of the Red Sea so they could safely get away from the Egyptian army; provide fresh drinking water for them from a bitter stream in the wilderness. And now, the next challenge. Provide food for his hungry followers. Come on Moses. Step it up.

In my previous life, before working for the church, I worked as a retail manager. Over the years I had occasions to promote an employee to the role of Assistant Manager. One of the first things I would tell them is that in your new role, you can no longer be a member of the complainers. You are now the person who listens attentively, and then seeks a solution. Anyone can stand back and point out what’s wrong; but if you don’t have a proposed solution, then you are just complaining. Moses heard the complaining of the people, so did the next level of management (God) and they set out to do something about it. I find it interesting that after everything Moses

had done for the Israelites, there is nowhere in the Book of Exodus where it is written that they said thank you.

Is that us in our relationship with God? Always moving on to the next thing to pray for; the next favour; the next crisis we need help with; so much so that we sometimes just forget to stop and say thanks. We sometimes function like God has no idea what we're going through, so we need to constantly remind Him. Do we ever take time to look in the rear-view mirror and see God's fingerprints all over our journey? Yet, even then, we still feel the need to pray to God with the answer. I read a quote recently in one of Richard Rohr's reflections that said: "God, my lips say that I trust you totally; but my actions say that I really only trust myself and I am actually a little afraid of you". I can honestly say that when I read this quote, it screamed Mark Mahoney.

For much of my faith journey, I have viewed my relationship with God as transactional. I will do this for you, so you do this for me. It reminds me of a story I heard years ago:

***There was a 6 year old boy who wanted a new bicycle. When he went to ask his parents, his mother told him that he should go into his room and pray to Jesus and maybe he would get a new bike. So, the boy went into his room and started to pray. He said "Jesus, if you get me a new bike, I promise to be good for two whole weeks". Then he stopped and thought, I can't be good for two whole weeks. So, he started again: "Jesus, if you get me a new bike, I promise I won't yell at or tease my sister for the next month". He stopped again and thought, I can't do that either. As he was looking around the room, he saw a beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary. He got the statue down from the shelf, wrapped it in a beautiful soft blanket and put it under his bed. He then prayed: "Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again...."***

We sometimes think we can bargain with God. The one really big flaw in that thought process is that there is nothing we can do that can warrant us going to God and saying, "you owe me". And it's never about earning our way into heaven. There is a story of a man who died and was met by St. Peter. St. Peter asked him what he had done to warrant his admission into heaven. The man replied, "Well, I was a member of the Knights of Columbus, I was on parish council at my church, I was a reader and I even drove the priest to Riverside Albert whenever he needed to go". St. Peter then said, "That's great. All of those things have earned you 2785 points. You need 10,000 to get in. Do you have anything else?" The man threw his hands in the air and said, "Well it's only by the grace of God that I am getting in." St. Peter replied, "Exactly. Welcome!"

I spent so many years thinking this way and praying this way because for so long my faith was intellectual. It was in my head. It was based on give and take. Cause and effect. If I had a bad day Wednesday, it was because I missed mass on Sunday. Or if I had a good day on Friday, it was because of a good deed I did on Tuesday. I was engineering my own salvation. I believe the word for that is "heresy". I was the personification of what Paul calls in the Second reading "living in the futility of their minds". Something had to change.

I remember a wonderful old farmer I knew during my time at St. Augustine's. He could see things so clearly and he said to me one day: "the longest eight inches in the world is the space between your head and your heart". Jesus couldn't care less about what is in my head, but he sure is concerned with what's in my heart. And he always knows what's in my heart, and your heart. You can fool a lot of people, but never the one in the mirror and never God. God knows our true motivation for everything.

This is very evident in the gospel. When the crowds caught up to Jesus in Capernaum, Jesus was very quick to say: and I paraphrase: "you didn't come here just to see me. You came because you finished off the bread I gave you, and now you want more". But that is the end of the chastising. For Jesus, this then turned into an opportunity to teach. To help the crowds understand what to seek to find true peace and purpose for their lives. Why the crowds showed up didn't matter. The fact that they were there was what was important.

The same applies to us. We will most likely try many different paths in our attempts to come to God. Some of those paths might be a little misguided. I don't think that matters a whole lot to God. The fact that we are trying is what counts. God can work with that. It was like going back to visit Mom and Dad when they were still around. Yeah, the bread was always a treat; but it was time spent with them and the love and wisdom they shared that was the real food.

Mark Mahoney