



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B**

### ***O that we had meat***

*Readings: Exodus 16: 2-4, Ps 77, Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24, John 6: 24-35*

Our children were, to the best of my knowledge, never addicted to sweets. They did, however, have another weakness – cucumbers. So great was their passion that we used to purchase them by the yard and each child had an allotted and marked cucumber for the weekend. I mention this because cucumbers crop up, if you will forgive the pun, in today's Old Testament story. At first I thought my memory had deceived me because the Exodus account does not mention cucumbers. For that you have to turn to the parallel history recounted in Numbers Ch. 11 v5f. And there are the cucumbers.

The Hebrews are now well into their desert sojourn. They have been saved from the hordes of the Egyptians and fed with the bread which comes down from Heaven, the Manna.

Exodus tells us that they wanted some meat. Numbers tells us that they complained more elaborately saying, 'O that we had meat. We remember the fish we ate in Egypt – all for free. We remember the cucumbers, the

melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. Now we have nothing but this flipping manna.'

There are a couple of things worth noticing here. The first is the fragility and brevity of human memory.

This luxurious Egyptian idyll, which they now recall with affection, was but recently the place where they were cruelly enslaved and harshly treated. This gastronomic paradise was the place where their male children were routinely slaughtered to suppress them as a dangerous immigrant population. Now the tyranny is forgotten in a reverie of cucumbers.

The second thing to note is they have that all too human capacity to moan and, its inevitable corollary, a lack of thankfulness hardening into resentful ingratitude. They have rapidly reached a point in the pilgrim journey where they would swap their freedom for a bunch of leeks, their dependence on God and His mercy for a packet of fish fingers and a fan of melon.

The great hallmarks of a free people under God are to be traded in for a misremembered and illusory security under a pagan tyranny. To the objective observer, at some long historical remove, such incredible volte-face must seem inexplicable but to the student of human nature it is all too familiar.

Similarly, when Jesus feeds the five thousand, the crowd pursues Him around the lakeside not, as He notes, because they understand what He has done for them but because they are after another free lunch.

Daily, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, we pray for our daily bread, the sustenance that will fuel our journey and sustain our pilgrimage. We recognise that the road to the Promised Land is not an easy one loaded with luxury. But the road from the ghettos of Goshen to triumphant entry into Jerusalem is the road of freedom and becoming the People of God. If we start looking back longingly at the fleshpots of Egypt and fantasising about the joys of enslavement to sin and degradation then we have forgotten the reality and begun to deny our destiny.

As pilgrims in the Way that is Christ Himself, we never forget whence we came and from what twin tyrannies of sin and death He set us free. It is for this reason that the Mass begins with the penitential rite. Only by recalling the liberating Passover of Christ's death, the blood of the lamb that turns away the Angel of Death, can we begin to understand our journey to freedom and the long, hard, testing but glorious road home.

Once we have done that then the passage to the next stage of our human (and liturgical) journey can unfold. For the Liturgy reflects the spiritual reality of the Divine/Human engagement or it does nothing.

Too often we are moaners. We see what is wrong with our lot, what is wrong with other people. We forget to be thankful. It is no accident that the Eucharistic Prayer (the great prayer of Thanksgiving) is at the heart of the Mass and the context of the Consecration and the revelation of the Real Presence.

Moaning distorts truth, undermines reality, perverts memory, lies about reality, glorifies negativity, provokes bitterness, disables virtue and leaves the moaner exhausted, depressed and without hope.

Thanksgiving expands the heart, embraces hope, widens the vision, encourages the weak, strengthens the faltering, lifts up the fallen, empowers the weary, brings joy to the giver, solidarity to the disciples and opens the high way to praise and our reconciliation with the Transcendent revealed on our altars of the sacrifice in the True Bread from Heaven, Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

The Devil was a moaner whose dissatisfaction became dissent then disobedience. It is the first faltering step on the road to Hell.

The Disciple must always be a man who knows that Jesus Christ set Him free and therefore cultivates a grateful heart where the fruit of love and mercy are abundant.

If you are a natural moaner – and there are some of us about – it is a good exercise daily to remember that we are no longer the slave labourers of Satan but freedmen by the Lamb's Blood on the road to Jerusalem singing songs of praise and each night, before we go to bed, to give thanks to God for three things we have received this day.

I promise you, you won't look at a cucumber in the same way again.