

“Bread from Heaven” Sermon on Exodus 16

What is it ? Sisters and brothers...

It is white.

It looks like snow.

It tastes like honey.

And when the sun shines on it, it melts...

What is it?

The Israelites had obviously no idea at all, when they were on their demanding journey through the desert.

They'd left Egypt behind, heading for the promised land, and were then stuck in the wilderness between Elim and Sinai, the book of Exodus tells us.

The Israelites called the strange stuff that had fallen from the sky and then covered the ground “What is it?” Man hu, in Hebrew. Or: Manna.

A name for the sweets with which God helped his people to survive on their journey through the desert.

The text for my sermon which you have heard as the reading from the Old Testament is a travel diary, if you like.

It tells us of a journey through the wilderness that was sometimes really wild.

We are invited to be part of that journey,
to try to imagine what it must have felt like...
out there in the desert.

Not a nice place to be.

Scorching heat at daytime that dries you out;
and bitter cold at night that makes you freeze.

A place of extremes.

A place beyond normality.

Totally unbalanced...

The place where Jesus met the devil,
the time of trials and temptations...

That is where the Israelites find themselves – without any experience how to survive in such a place.

It is a matter of life and death. Once again.

They'd just managed to flee from slavery in Egypt and now feel like slaves again: captured in the desert, their lives at risk again...

If we try to remember, we might certainly recall some of the most hopeful times they had experienced too:

Hadn't they seen the Red Sea parting for them?

Hadn't they sung and danced with joy over their wondrous salvation?

Hadn't they come to the oasis of Elim with its 12 wells and 70 palms: Incredible abundance for the travelling people... everything their heart desired...

a foretaste of the promised land?!

But right there in the middle of death and desert, all these past things seem to be forgotten.

Everything feels much worse than before.

This isn't how they imagined their way to the promised land...

A terrible feeling spreads among the people:

we are not going to make it, they think.

That is not at all what we had expected...

the price of all this is too high.

It is going to kill us...

...and they start to blame their leaders.

“Didn't you bring us here into this miserable situation? Wasn't it you, who talked about freedom, until we were ready to go? It is all your fault. Had we stayed in Egypt, we'd be much better off. But now, now we are going to die...”

In their disappointment and anger they exaggerate terribly, claiming they'd had fleshpots and the fill of bread in Egypt...

They are too exhausted and frustrated to think straight, and turn to the well-known way of glorifying the past... against all rules of common sense.

By no means had they lived a good life in Egypt.

To just think that was totally unrealistic.

But in their momentary struggle for life they only had one desire:

eat and live... abundantly... here and now. No matter what it cost.

Then Moses speaks out.

Does he discuss and argue with them?

Tell them how blind and thoughtless they'd become?

Or does he tell them for goodness sake to stick it out?

Does he perhaps resign as their leader?

Nothing of all that.

Moses tells the people something quite surprising.

He says to them: “You are not complaining against us, Aaron and myself; you are complaining against God...”

Nothing more. Just that.

And then you can almost see the crowd getting excited...

What is that all about?

What has this miserable situation of ours got to do with God?

We want to live, here and now!

We are nearly dying, and Moses is splitting hairs...

Is it our fault that we are stuck in the desert? Starving and suffering?

Hasn't he told us of the promised land?

Hasn't he encouraged us to walk into freedom?

Hasn't he made us believe we'd manage?

And wasn't it him who always told us to carry on and continue with our journey?

However much fuss they make, Moses sticks to his answer.

Their complaint is against God.

And that is something nobody likes to hear.
 Because it reveals an uncomfortable truth about human beings...
 People tend to forget God's glorious deeds all too quickly:
 we glorify the past and insist that everything was much better then.
 And by doing so we miss out on life here and now.
 We become unable to create the present, and we set our hopes on everything else
 but not on God.
 We long for the fullness of life, and in spite of all our efforts we land in the
 desert.
 We know much of that.
 We'd love to change and do something about it, but we fail... again and again.

That is one truth about being human.
 It is exactly what the Bible calls sinful.
 And the crucial point is that sin in this case is not what the people actually do,
 but how they do it;
 how they look upon things;
 how they deal with each other, their history and situation.
 To me that means:
 not what I do at a certain point (whether I moan and complain or not),
 but how I approach the situation is significant.
 Do I easily become discouraged?
 Let doubts win over hope? Have too little faith altogether?

Not individual deeds count, but the attitude towards life in general!

There was nothing the Israelites could do in the desert;
 the fullness of life couldn't be forced.
 Only by patience, by persistence, by trust and faith
 the deathly situation in one of those forsaken places could be solved.

And when Moses tells the people: "You complain against God,"
 he doesn't actually blame them.
 He doesn't tell them off.
 He doesn't mean to make them feel guilty.
 God does not want to make people suffer from a bad conscience,
 but would love to see them living in freedom and tasting the fullness of life.

Let us just have a quick look at how God acts according to our story...
 After Moses has correctly realized that it is God the people are moaning against,
 he interferes and says to Moses:
 "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites...; tell them, in the evening they
 will eat meat... and in the morning there will be plenty of bread...
 And then you shall know that I am the Lord, your God..."

That is how God treats his human beings.
 No blame.
 No bashing.
 No accusation.

No slightest way of “alright, if you think you can ignore or forget me, then you may as well have to look after yourselves from now on...”

God doesn't do such things.

He (or she) hears the complaint of the people.

He takes in their sin and gives them the fullness they long for.

And then God does something else:

had the Israelites thought they'd had pots of meat and loads of bread in Egypt...

which of course wasn't true ... he now gives them their fill of meat and bread.

This is God's way with his people.

Still God gives in a different way than the Israelites would have thought.

He doesn't do magic there and then, creates an oasis with anything the heart could just desire... No.

God takes the desert seriously.

And he gives the Israelites from the gifts of the desert.

He gives them quails which regularly fly over the Sinai.

And he gives them Manna, a fruit of the desert that can still be found today.

It develops at night, falls to the ground and can be collected in the morning.

God gives what can be found in the desert.

And for the Israelites this is food from heaven!

They still have to recognize it as such,

they have to collect it,

and care for and do with as God has told them.

And: God doesn't only take the desert seriously.

He takes the people seriously too.

He does not act like superman.

He does not all of a sudden change and improve the situation by magic.

But he gives his people open eyes to see what is there.

He gives them the strength and imagination to grow out of their fear.

And he helps them to discover what life's still got in store for them.

Manna – the bread from heaven tastes like honey. Not dry bread, but honey: sweet and promising...

And that helps them to carry on on their journey to the land where milk and honey flow.

The Israelites were so overwhelmed, so surprised that they could only say:

What is it?

Could they take it as a foretaste for more?

Would it keep them going for long?

We all know that only for a little while after this experience the Israelites knew again that God was with them... the God that often does not give as we expect him to, but who surprises with his unexpected generosity and abundance:

The people of Israel don't have to live by bread alone, but shall also have the meat...

This old travel diary doesn't show us once and forever how to cope in the desert...
It doesn't give us directions on how to cope in the deserts of our days...
in the wildernesses of human life...

It doesn't forever make us fit to stand up against temptations and frustration.
It is no guarantee that we will never let trust and faith go...

But:

It does show us a God who gives fullness to his people, the fullness of life.

It shows us a God who wants to sustain us –
not by riches and luxury, but by being at our side,
walking with us and always caring for us –
certainly more often than we'd notice or realize...

(Just remember the small story at the beginning of this service...)

As Christians we don't have the magic formula for life once and for all.

In every phase of our life, in every single situation we have to rediscover God's care and closeness over and over again.

God's presence is nothing that we can have, that we can hold in our hands and possess. It is something that is always there, whether we can feel it or not.

It is something that is with us wherever we go.

And wherever our life journeys may lead, it is there as a promise...

to help us live,

to satisfy our hunger

and to surprise us ever again.

It tastes of honey...

... and it leads into freedom...

Maybe we can sometimes –

in the midst of everything –

just stand still,

realize what heaven can give,

look at it in disbelief and wonder,

and say – as the Israelites did: What is it?

... what is this again in my life?

And be sure: God will give you eyes to see what is there...-

in terms of energy, resources, angels, friends...

Just: bread from heaven.

Amen.

I am sure we will understand it ever better – by and by...

Let us sing this: MH 525 "By and by"...

Prayer

Loving God,
who are we on our journey in life?
Sometimes we hardly know.
And sometimes you know much better than we do.
You travel with us on many different roads.
You know the shadowy parts of our lives.
You know how we long for life which is full and free,
how we long to understand,
to know the truth, to leave the difficult behind us,
and lift our faces to the sun.
You know how weak and paralyzed we can be,
how we stand in helpless fear
before that which the future might bring.
You know how we sometimes forget you,
don't see you and your plans for us.
how we complain and fall in despair...
Therefore God, stand beside us,
help us to understand ever better,
what you can do for us...
and what good things you hold in store for us.
Bless us, God, with your peace,
that passes our understanding,
stand between us and all harm,
look upon us with grace,
heal us and make us strong. **Amen.**