

## God sustains us; we sustain each other

Exodus 16.1-15

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In the Netherlands, over 150.000 people are helped each year by food banks, voedselbanken. This is the number of 2019; I assume numbers have gone up a bit because of the present Corona crisis.

Worldwide about 690 million people are hungry.

Many parents worldwide cry to God, or to gods, for bread and water for their children. How horrible if you cannot feed your own children.



Where is God in such circumstances?

In our readings from the Old Testament we are going through the book of Exodus, and we have seen how God saved Israel from poverty and slavery in Egypt.

But after being saved from Egypt, after not more than a month of travelling through the desert, Israel had no more food.

No more food... and this began to sink in after Israel had just had a great time in the oasis of Elim where they had plenty of food and water.

### 1. We grumble so easily

In Elim there had been much water, shadow, and rest. After a few weeks of travelling, Israel must have felt great, relaxing in that oasis.

God gives his people moments of rest in the journey of life. I think we all, sometimes, experience these oasis-moments of joy, moment of nearness of God himself. Wouldn't we love to freeze such moments, to love in perpetual joy.

But life is a journey, and if we want to serve God on the journey, it is often not easy at all. Only an oasis every now and then, but much dry and hot desert with a lack of food.

When Israel in the desert met hardship, it began to grumble. The word 'grumble' is used seven times in this chapter.

After only one month in the desert, Israel dreamt of how much meat and bread they had in Egypt. They forgot about their slavery, it seems.

We Christians, we also complain a lot! Life is so full of things we can nag about.

But be a bit careful about grumbling.

Moses said to Israel, “You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.”  
(Exodus 16.8)

Why are we never satisfied? Why is there always something to complain about? Does God not take good enough care of you? Is that what you actually say?

## **2. God cares for us on life’s journey**

In defence of the grumblers of Israel: Interestingly, it is rewarded!

What would have happened if they had not grumbled? We do not know.

But I do know this: God prefers angry people over indifferent people.

At least, if people grumble, you can talk back and solve a problem. If they only fret in their heart, or they really do not care about how things go in their life or in church, it is much harder to help them.

There are moments when grumbling, when verbal action is needed. When governments abuse their people we have the right and the duty to speak up and to stand up.

When your pastor preaches nonsense, you must do something.

Israel grumbled against God. As if He who saved them from the mighty armies of Pharaoh could not save them from starvation.

But instead of punishing them, God blessed them. He is JHWH, the God of the covenant. God had saved Israel from Egypt, and he also sustains them on the road through the wilderness because He had promised to lead them to the Promised Land.

So He does not punish but He gives them exactly what they complained of not having: Meat and bread. His provision is fast, sufficient, and constant.

Does God always do this? No, not at all.

Christians who live in areas of poverty also die of hunger, just like their atheist or Muslim or Hindu neighbours. In Egypt, my office is at the moment helping hundreds of Coptic and Sudanese families who have no money for healthy food.

Why do children of God go hungry? I have no answer.

But it is a fact that God has given enough food on earth for all people, and that hunger is mostly the result of wars, or the lack of proper distribution of food.

But how does this answer satisfy the mother and father who pray God for help because they cannot feed their children?

How does this help mothers in Yemen who have their children die in their arms?

There is so much misery in the world, even for those who humbly and reverently obey their Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us do what we can to help others in need, and first see where our own responsibilities as humankind are before we blame God.

In the story we have read from the book of Exodus, we see that at that time, God provided food to all people – quail’s meat in the evenings, manna in the mornings.

This was an unmistakable miracle, and it continued for 40 years, until the people came at the borders of the Promised Land.

The people never lacked food, and they never had too much. God gave them just enough – and that is what we all should be satisfied with. Enough.

St John Chrysostom, a Church Father from the 4th century, said in one of his sermons that the Egyptians with their pots of meat were gluttons, and the Hebrews had to learn to give up this sin of gluttony. God gave them just enough, day by day.

“Our culture exhibits a schizophrenic attitude toward gluttony,” the American author Francine Prose writes in a delightful book titled *Gluttony*. Just watch TV for a while, she suggests:

One minute we are bombarded with images of food, advertisements for restaurants, or the latest sweet or fatty snack, with recipes and cooking tips. A minute later, we’re reminded that eating is tantamount to suicide, that indulgence and enjoyment equals social isolation and self destruction. And someone is making money from both sides of our ambivalence.

Let us eat and drink today, for tomorrow we diet.

We waste so much food, while 690 million people go hungry. Their hunger is not a law of nature. It is because we eat too much and waste too much.

Exodus 16.4 says that the people of Israel had to collect a days portion of Manna each day. This concept of daily provision, just enough, is reflected in the Lord’s Prayer: Give us today our daily bread.

Just as God took care of Israel on its journey, He promises us all we need if we pray.

He answers that prayer, give us today our daily bread.... He gives to us. To the community.

But inside the community, we have to then use what we have together, in a just manner. Not take for myself so much that others do not have enough.



I am very glad that in Arnhem our church is involved in the local food bank. To help people to have food is following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

There is no promise for us of luxury in the Bible; there is a promise of the presence of God for those who desire to serve him, and the promise of provision of just enough.

And none of us has less than that. Thank God. And with what we have extra, we are to support each other, and people beyond.

### 3. Jesus is God's sustenance for us

The manna we read about in Exodus is important in the New Testament. Jesus compares himself to that manna - He says he is the bread of life that came down from heaven.

Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people – you know the story, when these people only had a few pieces of bread and fish with them, Jesus helped the poor, the have-nots, and people in grave need. These were the people of God in need of help.



The miraculous feeding of these people happened on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee – in the wilderness. I think the Gospel writers purposely underline that this happened in a deserted place. It reminded the people of the story of how Israel in the desert was fed with bread by God.

Jesus explained the lesson of the feeding of the people: it should make people understand that He is able to give people the food that endures to eternal life.

Not our welfare in this earthly life, but being related to God should have our prime interest. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and God will sustain you.' For a Christian, this should be the sequence. God first, belly second.

The Jews did not really believe Jesus and his claims about him being the saviour of the world, even after they saw him feed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread.

So they asked him to prove his words. They asked him,

What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'

Jesus said to them,

Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” ( John 6.30-35)

Jesus does not just give us some bread that gives us eternal life. He says that he himself is that bread. He does not give a sign; He is the sign.

He is the Bread that God gave from heaven for the eternal salvation of mankind. The incarnation, the coming of the Son of God to our world, is the great message of the Church.

Jesus points us to that other life, beyond what we can see and touch. He points our hearts and our minds to the realm of God his Father, the dimension of the Spirit in which we live, and that surrounds us, invisibly, everywhere.

‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God’, is what Jesus tells these poor followers of him who were so worried about how to buy food, and clothing.

And for us, people who have much more than we need, ‘seek ye first’ contains marching orders. Help those who are in need. Feed the poor.

## **Conclusion**

God helped Israel on its journey through the desert – with just enough to serve them. Let us be satisfied with how our Lord cares for us in our life’s journey.

That movement with God through life is painful sometimes, but always rewarding.

God saved us through Jesus Christ; on our journey through life, our focus is on serving Him; and in our journey, He is with us.

What comfort that God offers himself in bread and wine to be part of your life, to sustain you, to bless you with communion with Him – even in the midst of your present problems or headaches or worries - of whatever sort they are.

And part of what we do in our journey with God, is to care for other people in need.

May Holy Communion today be an oasis-experience, where God gives you rest, and joy, and peace, and strength for the road.

We open our hands as a cup, to receive from Him what we need. He feeds you by giving Himself to you, the Bread of Life.

And by doing so, he helps you to cope with your hike through the wilderness and to help other people on the road.

**+ Amen**