

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, May 8th 2014

Before my First Communion, I was fascinated by the hosts used at Mass. What did they taste like?, I wondered. Sweet? Savory? After all the theological build-up, I figured they must taste different from run-of-the-mill breads.

Before the big day, our Sunday school teacher had us practice receiving the Body of Christ with unconsecrated hosts. Wouldn't you know it? They were as bland as an ice cream cone.

My last hope was that maybe the flavor would improve once they were consecrated. Imagine my child-like disappointment come First Communion Day!

The Gospel today comes from John's Bread of Life discourse. Jesus tells his disciples and us,

I am the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;

this is the bread that comes down from heaven

so that one may eat it and not die.

To the modern palate, manna raining down in the desert may seem dry and insipid; almost mythic. But surely Jesus, the Bread of Life, will taste sweet and make me feel vital and alive. Right?

So why don't I feel different after Communion, Lord? And why don't I always feel things when I try to pray?

I wonder if my childhood expectations have ever gone away. Today's Gospel calls attention to a simple fact: Jesus' choices were pretty ordinary, almost unremarkable. Despite that, bread remains one of the most basic, most universal food we humans consume the world over. Think of it – from baguettes to injera, naan to pita, and tortillas to chapati – every culture has its bread. Bland though it be, it is a source of life.

So too with paying attention to God at work in our life. We hope prayer will be exciting, with God holding our interest through attention-grabbing spiritual treats and rewards. Every once in a while, spiritual fireworks happen that we can feel. But most of the time, prayer is a little bland, and we – at least I! – can think of a dozen things I'd add to spice it up.

But that, I trust, is missing the point of prayer. Jesus taught us to ask God for our daily bread; he was strangely silent on asking for tasty toppings.

Though daily prayer may feel bland or unremarkable, it has nourished people like us across the centuries – and globe. May the grace today be to ask for our daily bread, and to be grateful for the life we receive!

I am the living bread that came down from heaven;

whoever eats this bread will live forever;

and the bread that I will give

is my Flesh for the life of the world.

Joe Simmons, S.J.