

2023 Devotional Address at Benediction

Bishop Roger Jupp, Chairman of the Glastonbury Pilgrimage Association

"In the morning... when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, 'It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat'" (Exodus 16: 13-15)

This is how the book of Exodus tells of the appearance of the bread from heaven which God promised to Moses that he would rain on the children of Israel to be their daily food during their wandering in the wilderness after their escape from slavery in Egypt. They were hungry and complaining and not much would satisfy them in their refractory state. So when this heavenly sustenance appeared, not surprisingly, they asked "What is it?" And this is the meaning of the food's name manna. Manna means "the-what-is-it." It had never been seen before because it had never been before. It was God's gift: it was a small, white, flaky substance like the seed or fruit of the coriander, we are told, and it tasted like wafers made with honey. Seen when the morning dew began to disappear, it melted under the heat of the sun. And the miraculous character of the manna was emphasized by the fact that it ceased instantly when no longer needed. It is a strange tale, of course, a miraculous tale indeed, a story of a bread rained down from heaven, unlike anything else experienced, which fed the people throughout their forty years' wanderings until they came to the land the Lord had promised them. But such was the miraculous gift, it had no name except "the-what-is-it," that is, manna, the unnamed gift, the no name gift. The peoples' question "What is it?" became the way people talked about it.

But then many generations later, Jesus spoke to the multitude which had followed him because of the signs they saw him do, especially that of the loaves and fishes, and he reminded them of this wilderness experience. "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Jesus then said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven' (John 6:31-32). Jesus was speaking of himself, and he went on to teach them that, by eating the food which is himself, they would live for ever. And after the Last Supper, and the gift of the Eucharist, the Church understood the meaning of this, and asked us its members to abide by its truth, asking that, like the apostles, we would recognize the Lord in the breaking of the bread, that is, recognise the Lord Jesus who taught us to believe in his name because, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven;

if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51).

In all the generations since the giving of this gift, the gift beyond all others, we have often been like the people of Israel who asked "What is it?" And how many theological books have been written to seek to answer this question? "What is it?" But, of course, it is the wrong question. The question is not "What is it?" but "Who is it?" We have failed so often to recognize the wonderful truth and marvellous value of this enduring gift of God by trying to put the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord under a microscope, poking at it and poring over it to try to find a convincing answer in all the eucharistic arguments of Christian history. There is no need for analysis. This is Jesus! As the hymn* says, this is Jesus who came "adored by angels," who "came with peace from realms on high". This is Jesus, who "came for our redemption," who "lowly came on earth to die." This is Jesus who "came in deep humility." To this gift, our hearts and voices can only respond not with the deathly question, "What is it?" but Alleluia, alleluia!

**Blessed, praised and hallowed be Jesus Christ, on his throne of glory,
and in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.**

*Jesus came, adored by angels by Godfrey Thring 1823-1903, Anglican clergyman & hymn writer. Although Matthew Bridges (1800–94) wrote the original verses to Crown Him with Many Crowns, it was Thring who added the extra verses. Here is the hymn referred to in the address.

1 Jesus came, adored by angels, came with peace from realms on high; Jesus came for our redemption, lowly came on earth to die: Alleluia, alleluia! came in deep humility.

2 Jesus comes again in mercy, when our hearts are bowed with care; Jesus comes again in answer to our earnest heartfelt prayer; Alleluia, alleluia! comes to save us from despair.

3 Jesus comes to hearts rejoicing, bringing news of sins forgiven; Jesus comes in sounds of gladness, leading souls redeemed to heaven; Alleluia, alleluia! now the gate of death is riven.

4 Jesus comes on clouds triumphant, when the heavens shall pass away; Jesus comes again in glory; let us then our homage pay: Alleluia, alleluia! till the dawn of endless day.