

A nation in the desert. We left the slavery of Egypt, slavery that was supposed to be salvation. The place that saved our lives, but took away our dignity. Now we are free, but that freedom is tough. We have no home, we are walking through the desert, and nobody seems to know where we are headed. God must help us. We still see the cloud and we still see the fire. The images of the plagues are still alive in our memory. The corpses of the Egyptian army still lie on the seacoast. But it all seems so distant, like a legend. In the meantime there is nothing to eat, and leadership has lost its way. So we fight each other. We question the past, question the future, question our wisdom, and question our faith.

We are the people in the desert. God must answer. And he does answer in his own way, as always. Let us first realize what he didn't do. He didn't remove the desert, or turn it into some sort of paradise valley, although he easily could have. He didn't turn us into superheroes who can run for miles without any food. He didn't build the promised-land around us wherever we stood. He did act in his own amazing way: He gave us food from heaven. He literally dropped the food from heaven and, no, it's not a fairytale or a legend. His food is very subtle and delicate. Every one of us has to gather it on our own; we cannot hoard it, we cannot keep it for the future. This pilgrimage through the desert is God's school of freedom. Every one of his gifts, even the food, is very carefully measured, so as not to become a bribe. He doesn't want us to become slaves who trade their dignity for food. He wants us to be his friends. In order to strengthen us on the way, he gave us food. We don't have to fight each other anymore. Under his guidance, we can grow in our ability to trust him and each other until we take possession of the promised-land.

Fast forward two thousand years. We are again standing and fighting each other. God became man and said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever." Yet we, the descendants of the pilgrims from the desert, are still unhappy; we don't believe him. For us, the divine food is a fairytale, it is not real. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? It sounds crazy and maybe even dangerous.

Fast forward another two thousand years. We are still marching and quarreling. We demand the right thing: we want dignity, we want freedom, we want the promised-land. We fight each other. We don't know who to follow and we still don't know where we are going. Yet through all these years and all these places, through all these quarrels and all these dreams, the same voice speaks to our hearts: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." God responds with his astonishing wisdom, as always. He doesn't turn our times into a paradise valley. He doesn't transform us into powerful angels. He gives us food from heaven: Himself. Food for the road, to the destination that will reveal our dignity and that will allow our freedom to be fruitful. He gives Himself to us freely to eat so that when we are overburdened with our mistakes, with our evil, with our quarrels, we can lay them down at the feet of his Mercy, and receive the bread that is his Body. This food is not a reward for good behavior, but a support for tired pilgrims. Food that is not a tool of dominance over others, but a

sign of equality in our weakness. Christ's Body is that food; it is also a compass in the hearts of people lost in the desert of history.

Zion, to Your Saviour sing,
to Your Shepherd and Your King,
sing with canticle and hymn.

Dare with song to praise him well
though he does all praise excel,
never cease from praising him.

Wondrous theme of mortal singing,
living bread and bread life-giving,
is our theme, our task, today.

So let no one be deceived:
the living bread the Twelve received
is the same that we consume.

Sound the anthem, clear and strong,
the fullest note, the sweetest song,
the very music of the breast.

For now there dawns a day sublime
that brings remembrance of the time
when Jesus first his table blessed.

Now the New Law's new oblation
by the new King's revelation
ends the form of ancient rite.

Now the new the old replaces,
truth away the shadow chases,
light dispels the gloom of night.

What he did at supper seated,
Christ ordained to be repeated
in his memory divine.

Wherefore now, his guidance taking,
bread and wine we hallow, making
lasting food for our salvation.

This is the truth each Christian learns,
bread into flesh he turns,
wine becomes his holy blood.

Though we feel it not, nor see it,
ardent faith, which now reveals it,
all defects of sense makes good.

Here in outward signs are hidden
wondrous things to sense forbidden;
What we see are signs alone.

Wine is poured and bread is broken,
but in one or other token
Christ entire we know to be.

Those who of this food partake
neither rend the Lord nor break:
Christ is whole for all who taste.

Thousand are, as one, receivers,
one, as thousands of believers,
eat of him who cannot waste.

Both the wicked and the good
eat and drink the self-same food,
one to death, and one to life.

Though they both consume
the Lord, equal in the sacred rite,
see how they divide in fate!

When at last the bread is broken
doubt not what the Lord has spoken:
he is present in each token;
now each part contains the whole

For the outward sign alone
may some change have undergone,
while the Signified stays one
and the same for evermore.

Look! upon the altar lies,
hidden deep from human eyes,
bread of angels from the skies,
made the food of mortal man.

Childrens' food to dogs denied
in wondrous prophecy described:
in the manna from the sky, in the binding
of the boy, in the sacrificial lamb.

Christ, Good Shepherd, bread divine,
show to us your mercy sign.
Feed us still, still keep us thine
that we may see your glory shine
in the kingdom of the good.

Source of all we have or know,
come and guide us here below,
make us, at your table seated,
by your saints as friends be greeted,
co-heirs at the feast of love.

Lauda Sion Thomas Aquinas, O.P. (translation after Paul Murray, O.P.)