

In 1970 as a Vicar of a thriving District Church, I needed £2,000 within a week to meet starting work on an urgently needed new church hall large enough to have a Badminton Court, after the old one burnt down. In today's terms that is more than £300,000. We had already got £6,500 but many people thought it was impossible to raise this extra amount. Although the PCC had this much in reserve and I offered a personal guarantee, the Rector influenced them to refuse to lend it to me. Two days later I received a £2,000 cheque in the post from a generous donor. Naturally I assumed that he had heard of my problem but, no, he had posted it the same day as the PCC evening meeting. So you will not blame me for considering this an answer to prayer; pennies from heaven. No doubt you could echo similar experiences. Perhaps not receiving a large sum of money, but getting a house or flat, or a job, or a helping hand. Just when you needed it, the unexpected miracle happened and your need was met. Was it a miracle, or just a strange coincidence?

Our Old Testament reading (Exodus 16.2-15) tells of the children of Israel beating their way across the Sinai Desert after escaping the shackles of Egypt. Day after day they forced their weary limbs over the barren wastelands. The hot sun of the day and the penetrating cold of the night showed no mercy. Hungry and thirsty with the crying of the children and the moaning of the aged, was enough to break the most confident of hearts. Hearts did break and the murmuring voices increased. They cried: "If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat round the fleshpots and had plenty of bread to eat!"

Many today feel a little like that: maybe not as strongly as the Israelites, but wondering whether the struggle of life is worthwhile: particularly when they look back on the past with longing. They wonder if the spiritual interpretation of life is worth the effort. Maybe it would be better to go back to the old life, the old world, and the old conditions. They may not have been such rosy days, but they seemed so in retrospect. Of course, we ought to go on believing in God and trusting him even when we are depressed or exhausted; when everything is against us: obedient to death, as was Jesus, as were many of the Christian martyrs throughout the ages, as were the early explorers. But because we cannot all achieve this spiritual heroism, God does not cast us off like an unwanted item of clothing. He gives bread in the wilderness, manna from heaven.

This method of provision by God can be rather humiliating. Humiliating when we want to be first class believers, and God offers us help at a lower level. Humiliating yes, but comforting. For God knows our strengths and weaknesses and never asks more than we are able to give; though God's provision is subtle. It is never aimed solely at comfort, but also at development. God does not spoon-feed. That is why the Israelites in the wilderness had to fetch the manna that God provided. Why they had to cook the food. Why they had to collect it fresh every day. They had to make an effort themselves.

There is another point about that manna. When the Israelites first saw it, they asked "What is it?" It was not obviously divinely provided. It could have been ordinary desert lichen. This is the way

God normally works. That house; that job; that money; or that friend who turned up; just when you needed them most; was it a miracle; an answer to prayer? Or was it just a strange coincidence?

Or think of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and other aspects of religious experience. Is it of divine origin; or due to some natural psychological cause? Plenty of scholars are ready to make such claims either way. We always have a choice to make in matters of belief. For God's provision is very subtle. He meets our need but requires our effort, for he is concerned about our development as much as our comfort. In the presence of gifts, we must make the effort to faith. We must decide to accept.

One of the weaknesses of today's life is that many social reformers have not paid enough attention to this divine method of giving. Man is encouraged more by help earned, than by help handouts. The girl who wins a scholarship has her abilities stretched far more than one who has been given a free grant. A boy, who expects to do a small job for his pocket money, has his character developed and appreciates more the value of money. Years ago, when the "Bob-a Job" Scouts swept leaves for me, I made them do it again because it was not good enough. But when they did it well, I paid them twice as much as they expected. As a familiar Chinese proverb says: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime". Do not give good things away. Let there be some effort for them; even if the value of the work does not equal the value of the gift.

In St John's Gospel (6 32-40), Jesus said: "I am the bread of life". A few verses later he said: "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died ... I am the living bread ... if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever". The Hebrews in the wilderness had to collect their manna daily to live. They could not store it; they needed to collect their "daily bread". For us, our manna is Jesus Christ. We need to partake of him daily for our spiritual life. What vessel will you use to gather him? It could be prayer; or the sacraments; or bible study; or church fellowship: or a mixture of them. But religious experiences are not an end in themselves; they are a means to an end. Their purpose is to enable us to partake of the heavenly food. It is the contents of the bucket that are important; not the bucket itself. We will soon learn this if, as the song says, there is "a hole in my bucket".

But to return to the beginning. When we are down and out; depressed, frustrated, or have doubts about the right action to take: in surprising ways God gives us his manna in the wilderness. It may be humiliating that we need it. But we should receive it in faith, as God's provision. We then become integrated people. Such is God's aim. Those who want to figuratively remain in serfdom among the flesh pots of Egypt: those who want to remain in servile existence and security of the past: will never be truly happy with their lot - even if it is granted. But those who are willing to strike out across the wilderness of the future with confidence and trust in prayer, will find that God will not let them down. He will provide them with the nourishment, strength and encouragement

they need, if it is good for you; true manna from heaven: the food of life; our daily bread.