

Here are some actual complaints received by THOMAS COOK VACATIONS from dissatisfied customers.

1. On my holiday to Goa in India, I was disgusted to find that every restaurant served curry. I don't like curry.
2. They should not allow topless sunbathing on the beach. It was very distracting for my husband who just wanted to relax.
3. We went on holiday to Spain and had a problem with the taxi drivers as they were all Spanish.
4. We booked an excursion to a water park but no one told us we had to bring our own swimsuits and towels. We assumed they would be included in the price.
5. The beach was too sandy. We had to clean everything when we returned to our room.

OK, first some background on this gospel text. We remember that we are in the B cycle of readings, which come from the gospel of Mark, the shortest of the 4 gospels. Because of the brevity of Mark's gospel, the designers of the lectionary inserted a 5 week series from the 6th chapter of the gospel of John, known as the 'Bread of Life Discourse.' There are many layers to this Eucharistic discourse; I hope to mine some of them as we move through these next few weeks. Today we hear Jesus say "I am the bread of life." He is showing how the manna in the desert foreshadowed His own coming. "I AM" is a way Jesus identifies Himself with God, claiming His divinity. He speaks in the manner of God in the Old Testament where "I AM" is God's name given to Moses in Exodus 3:14. As 'the bread of Life,' Jesus is the one who gives bread that IS eternal life. Real hunger can only be satisfied through a personal relationship with this one who IS eternal life, Jesus. (AT HOME WITH THE WORD, p. 115)

To us, manna sounds like a pretty nice treat. Some parts of Scripture make it appear something like milk and honey. Surprisingly, it got its name because when the Israelites first discovered it on the desert floor they said something like, 'Manna?' which we would translate into English as 'What is this?' Although nobody recorded their tone of voice, scholars assume that it didn't echo a woman who just discovered a diamond bracelet in her birthday card. They had been complaining that Moses had freed them only to lead them to a slow death in the desert. It was probably more like 'What's this manure?' – but I don't think that was the exact word they used. It was probably a word I can't say in church. From that vantage point, aging out as slaves in Egypt looked like a better – but now lost opportunity.

In response to their complaints, God instructed them to collect what they called 'manna?' Moses explained that it was the bread the Lord had given them to eat. Something like an ancient version of instant breakfast, it was a 100% natural substance left by insects who had extracted juice from a particular fruit. People could gather and eat the pellets or flakes and even bake them into a kind of bread. This 'bread from heaven' seems to belong to the category of foods that the less you know about their background the more you might enjoy them. If it came FROM the insect AFTER it had eaten the fruit, we get the full picture. But the manna kept the Israelites going. It gave them nourishment – but more importantly – it served as a sign of God's constant care for them. With the manna, they were able to continue the journey toward becoming the chosen people in the land God wanted to give them. Strange as manna first appeared, its story evolved into a classic and cherished tale of God's providential care, including the warning that it would decay if anyone tried to hoard it.

The people ate that bread day after day until they arrived in the promised land. In the process, they grew in gratitude for what it meant -- as much as they appreciated how it arrived and how it tasted. They came to realize that the manna and the quail were not just food, but signs, what we call sacraments of God's

care for them. The more they acknowledged that, the more their eating became a communion, a way of receiving and taking in God's love. Eating that bread would transform them. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 5 August 2018, p. 1)

Second, so what does this have to do with us? The manna – this Bread of Life – the Eucharist – it's all about hunger. The hungers of the human heart. On February 12, 1944, 13-year-old Anne Frank wrote these words in her now-famous diary: "Today the sun is shining, the sky is a deep blue, there is a lovely breeze and I am longing – so longing for everything. To talk, for freedom, for friends, to be alone. And I do so long....to cry! I feel as if I am going to burst, and I know that it would get better with crying; but I can't, I'm restless, I go from room to room, breathe through the crack of a closed window, feel my heart beating, as if it is saying, "Can't you satisfy my longing at last?" I believe that it is spring within me. I feel that spring is awakening. I feel it in my whole body and soul. It is an effort to behave normally. I feel utterly confused. I don't know what to read, what to write, what to do. I only know that I am longing."

Inside each of us, at the center of our lives, there is a hunger, a tension, an ache, an insatiable fire that cannot be quieted. We are always longing. Sometimes this is focused on a person, particularly if we are in a love that is not consummated; at other times we experience this as a longing to attain something.

Often, though, it is a longing with no clear focus and no clear name, an aching that cannot be pinpointed or described. Like Anne Frank, we only know that we are longing, restless, hungry, full of disquiet.

Why is it so difficult to be restful and satisfied? What is it within the human spirit that makes us so incurably erotic, full of wanderlust, so easily given over to depressive nostalgia? Shakespeare talked of 'immortal longings.' St. Augustine prayed: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Fr. Karl Rahner, who was a great admirer of Augustine, once said that "in the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we come to realize that, in this life, all symphonies must remain unfinished." (adapted from THE RESTLESS HEART: FINDING OUR SPIRITUAL HOME, Ronald Rolheiser, p. ix-x)

Third, so what's the solution to this deep down hunger and longing? You may have seen a commercial that aired during the holidays a number of years ago. A thirty-something woman with stylish short red hair was seated in an expensive restaurant. The woman was well dressed, well to do, well kept, and attractive. The camera focused on her face as she talked to an unseen friend sitting across the table. "Jack got another promotion. He's really doing well," she says flatly. There's a pause. She continues, "And the kids...the kids are great." Another pause: "Did I tell you Jack got another promotion?" Then sheepishly, "I guess I did." During the pauses there are flashes of the same woman, home alone, a drink in her hand, crying. She concludes, almost with a sob, "Everything's great....It's just....I'm not happy." The commercial offered an 800 number for a free copy of A POWER FOR LIVING, a devotional book, very possibly the Bible. It concluded with the reassuring message, "No one will call."

It was haunting. Part of it was the marvelous acting on the part of the actress. Part of it was the filming. It seemed as if she was sitting right across the table and talking directly to me. But part of it was the irony of this woman who SEEMED to have everything – plenty of money, good health, good looks, a successful husband, 'great kids,' seated in an expensive restaurant, yet still *hungering* and *thirsting* for something.

We ALL have hungers and thirsts that mere food cannot fill. And we need to realize this – and admit it. So that we can move on. We all have hungers of the heart. All symphonies remain unfinished. This is just a fact of life that we all must accept, despite our culture's constant message that we can have it all. No we

can't. One of the life's major questions is how do we deal with this inner thirst or hunger? Often in our culture, we try to 'fill up' on possessions. Reminds me of the bumper sticker: Whoever dies with the most toys wins! But guess what – even if you have the most toys -- you STILL DIE! In 1923, a famous meeting was held in the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Attending this famous meeting were: Charles Schwab, President of America's largest independent steel company; Samuel Insull, President of America's largest electric utility; Howard Hopson, President of the nation's largest gas company; Arthur Cutten, America's premier speculator in wheat; Richard Whitney, President of the New York Stock Exchange; Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall; Jessie Livermore, Wall Street's most aggressive investor; Leon Fraser, President of the Bank of International Settlement; and Ivar Krueger, head of one of the world's largest monopolies.

Obviously, each of these men had invested decades pursuing possessions. But were they happy? Here's how, 25 years later, these same men turned out. 25 years later the president of the largest independent steel company died bankrupt; the president of the largest electric utility died a fugitive from justice, penniless; the head of the largest gas company was insane; the biggest wheat speculator died abroad, insolvent; the president of the New York Stock Exchange had just been released from prison; the Secretary of the Interior was pardoned from another prison so he could die at home; Wall Street's biggest investor had committed suicide; the president of the international bank also took his own life; the head of the monopoly committed suicide too. We may TRY to fill our inner emptiness with possessions. But mere possessions will not fill the hungers of the heart.

So then some people try to fill it with performance. Like Avis, "we try harder." Former football coach Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys knows a lot about peak performance. He was a college football star, and then played for the New York Giants. Later he was head coach of the Cowboys. Landry had 20 straight winning seasons at Dallas, and 2 Super Bowl victories. He was twice elected NFL Coach of the Year, and inducted in to the Hall of Fame. Peak performance. Did it make him happy? He said in an interview: "I wanted to be a good football coach, so my whole life was absorbed in that. As I went up the ladder all the way to becoming a professional football player and winning world championships....I discovered after the excitement of winning or being successful, there was always an emptiness and restlessness that stayed with me afterwards." He continued, "I didn't understand that. I thought that somewhere along the way you ought to win a victory that would sustain you for the rest of your life. But I never discovered that kind of satisfaction." Tom Landry DID NOT FEEL, as Vince Lombardi apparently did "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Landry found that even great success left him feeling empty. Peak performance, success, fame, none of them will fill our inner hunger and thirst.

We ALL have hungers of the heart. Pleasure, possessions, performance, and popularity will not fill them. But those hungers and thirsts are good things: the woman's painful emptiness in the commercial is a good thing. Our dissatisfaction and restlessness are good things. Tossing and turning sleepless at night, wondering who we are and where we're going is a good thing. If we honestly face all of this – we should come to realize that what we are REALLY hungering and thirsting for is a relationship with God. Augustine was right when he said, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in Thee." It's true that, as it has been said, there is a 'God shaped hole' in every one of us – an emptiness that only God can fill.

Physical hunger and thirst are blessed if they drive us to take healthy nourishment. Our spiritual hunger and thirst are blessed if they drive us to God. When God creates a hunger and a thirst in our souls, it is so that God alone can satisfy them. When we sin, we feel our need for forgiveness – drawn to the one who will forgive us.

How blessed we are, every week, to be ABLE to come to Mass to be set right with God and one another! How blessed you and I are to be able to lay down our burdens, to have the chance of renewal of life! How blessed we are to hear Jesus' words: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

Whatever it is that we are hungry for – possessions, performance, popularity, pleasure – the REAL 'SOUL FOOD' we need is a relationship with Jesus Christ! That's food for thought, and what satisfies the hungry heart. Let the Church say AMEN. (last section adapted from Alex Gondola, LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Aug-Sept 2006)

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