 Those were the closing words of this morning’s Gospel reading, and they assure those who turn to Christ that we shall find in him all the sustenance that we need to live out our Christian discipleship.

In our Gospel reading Jesus makes reference to our first reading, from the book Exodus. You will remember that Jacob and his sons had fled to Egypt at a time of famine. They and their households amounted to just 70 people when they arrived, and they had been treated as honoured guests, because Joseph, one of the sons, had been sold into slavery by his brothers, and he had risen to one of the top positions in the land, responsible, among other things, for national policy in response to the terrible long-term famine. But over time the Hebrew population had multiplied, and the Egyptian authorities had forgotten that history: the situation deteriorated, and in a famous phrase of the King James Bible, “There arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.” We can’t know whether the new Pharaoh was personally prejudiced against these foreigners, or whether he was responding to a widespread anti-immigrant mood in the country, but the Israelites were progressively reduced to a state of slavery, and so God called Moses to deliver them from that, and lead them to Canaan, which they called the Promised Land.

This people became an unruly nightmare for Moses – they didn’t stick to their side of the bargain by being faithful to the teachings of their faith, and they became mutinous if they had to cope with hardships as they crossed the wilderness; you heard some of their grumbles in our first lesson, and a couple of chapters earlier in Exodus their leaders unleashed an angry and sarcastic flounce against Moses, “Is it because there were no graves left in Egypt that you brought us here into the wilderness to die?” (Exodus 14:11) And they forgot how austere their slaves’ rations had been, and they began talking
longingly of “the fleshpots of Egypt”! God’s response to this curmudgeonly behaviour is a wonderful and moving glimpse of his generosity, in that he promised to rain down on them “bread from heaven” in the form of manna (Exodus 16:4).

As I said those words “bread from heaven” at least some of you will have called to mind the hymn, Guide me O thou great Redeemer, and specifically the last lines of the first verse,

Bread of heaven, bread of heaven

Feed me now and evermore

That hymn is clearly based on the Exodus story, but with significant changes: in the hymn there is no mention of the people of Israel, it is about the individual worshipper; he or she is described as a pilgrim, someone on a journey to strengthen faith. It’s also influenced by the passage from St John’s Gospel which we heard this morning, in which Jesus describes himself as the true bread, so that in the hymn the words “Bread of heaven” are in effect another name for Christ, the “great Redeemer” of the first line.

The second verse is also based on the Exodus story: “Open thou the crystal fountain” refers to Moses striking a great rock in the wilderness so that it gushed out water for the Israelites to drink; and the lines

Let the fiery cloudy pillar

Lead me all my journey through

refer to the account in Exodus of Moses and the people being guided by a pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night (Exodus 13:21f.), but the hymn writer transposed that to make it about the individual Christian’s journey through life, rather than the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness.

For the Israelites the Jordan was the final frontier which they had to cross to enter the Promised Land. The imagery of the verge of Jordan is there in the last verse of “Guide me O thou great Redeemer”, but when the hymn writer prays that his anxious fears might subside, those fears are the fear of his or her own death, not anxieties about literally taking possession of the land of Canaan, and the prayer is offered to the one who is “Death of death and hell’s destruction”, in other words, to Christ the Redeemer. That imagery has given rise to the use of “crossing over” as a pious way of speaking of death: only the other day I had an e-mail with news of an elderly and devout person
approaching her death, and her friend had written, “It would be such a relief for her to Cross Over.”

When we turn to the Gospel according to St John, the exchange about the bread of heaven or the bread of life comes after the feeding of the five thousand – Jesus had slipped away, but the crowd had sought him out. Jesus reproached them for not really understanding what he had done in that miracle – he in effect said they had just followed him because they thought they had found a wonder-worker who could fill their bellies – you are following me “not because you saw signs (in other words, not because you understood the spiritual significant of the miracle of the loaves and fishes), “but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” And he goes on, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

As so often in John’s Gospel, the people Jesus addresses show themselves half understanding his significance, but only half, so in this case they were able to appeal to the fact that the Israelites, whose successors they were, had been sustained by the miracle of the manna, “Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” In his reply, Jesus by subtle contrasts of the words used, makes clear the dramatic difference between bread that merely assuages physical hunger, and the bread which is true spiritual nourishment, and he also draws a contrast between transient events in the past and God’s eternal power active in his present: listen carefully to what St John reports him as saying, “It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ Did you hear the contrast between past and present: “It was [past tense] not Moses who gave [another past tense] the bread from heaven.” As we know, the words “bread from heaven” are part of the Exodus story, and if Jesus, in response to that, appears to minimise the significance of that miracle, it is because that bread was just to stop the people starving in the wilderness; he goes on, “It is [continuous present tense] my Father who gives you [continuous present again] the true bread from heaven [note the key defining phrase, true bread]. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Understand that to mean “gives and will keep on giving life to the world”. And note that what is at stake here is a gift to the whole world; it is not about the private gratification of initiates of an exclusive in-group. Then Jesus sums up the whole of this exchange about bread in the words which I took as our text, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be
thirsty.” That makes it quite clear that he is talking about bringing believers enduring spiritual nourishment, and not just the satisfying of transient physical hunger. The words in that text about quenching thirst, the spiritual thirst of the believer, echo what he had said earlier in the gospel, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:14)

I mentioned a moment ago that the bread of life and the living water that Christ lavishes on us are not to be hoarded for our private spiritual satisfaction, but they are intended for the whole world, and they can only be transmitted by the way that we share the fruits of the spirit in our dealings with other people. We heard in our reading from St Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians that spiritual gifts are “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). A spiritual writer of our own time has coined the phrase “other-centred”: it is, of course the opposite of self-centred, and it is intended to emphasise the importance of reaching out to others with their welfare and their flourishing at heart.

Let me close with a prayer on that theme which I saw quoted in a reflection last week on the feast of St Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits. It was written by a Jesuit in 18th century Flanders, but it is a meditation on a much venerated Roman icon dating back to the 5th century, and known as the Madonna della Strada, Our Lady of the Way. It is a major focus of prayer in the great Jesuit church of the Gesú in Rome, and the Jesuits keep the festival associated with this icon as their patronal festival. This prayer reflecting on its depiction of Mary and the infant Christ is in effect a meditation on their primary work as a missionary order:

Mother Mary,

Be for me an example of surrender and engagement.

Create within me

a heart that is honest and pure,
a heart that offers a haven to others,
a heart that is generous and resolute,
ever able to overcome difficulties,
always ready to begin again;
a humble heart
that in all things looks to Jesus,
your Son and our Lord.
May we hold fast to that ideal as we look to Jesus, the Bread of Life. Amen