

All sports, especially at the Olympic or professional level, require a high degree of sacrifice, a lot of training, a lot of dedication and sometimes pain and disappointments as well. If you have been following this year's Olympics, or if you are an athlete yourself, then you know what I am talking about.

Besides the Olympics, for the last three years, Judy and I have been following the Tour de France, which is the pinnacle of bicycle racing. For sheer endurance, this event is unparalleled. For over three weeks, these athletes ride 60 to 100 miles a day, in all weather conditions and in all terrains – including crossing the Alps. They burn up to a staggering 5000 calories a day! I probably don't burn that in a week or maybe two!

In order to compete, they have to maintain the calories that they burn. If they burn 5000, they need to take in 5000 or more. All of their skills, all of their training count for nothing if they fail to keep this balance between output and intake. And so they eat, almost constantly. The team cars distribute to the riders as they ride, foods designed to replenish, not only calories, but vitamins, minerals and electrolytes.

For them food is the difference between victory and defeat.

On the other side, for those who are starving – food is central. It is what they think about constantly, what they worry about – even what they dream about. In areas where hunger is rampant, some of the most basic levels of our breakdown. Lying, cheating, stealing, even killing might become the norm rather than the exception.

In school we may have learned about Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In case you aren't familiar with it, basically Maslow says that in order to function on a higher level – being a moral person, a good person, a creative person, a loving person – certain needs have to be taken care of.

Simply put, if a person who is truly starving, he will not be writing poetry, or contributing in a positive way to society.

Maslow's theory is much more complex but the reason I bring it up at all, is that Jesus knows, at a very base level, that we cannot feel safe, we cannot love, we cannot have self-esteem, and we cannot be fully human until our most basic needs are taken care of.

Jesus always saw to the physical needs of the people he had cured, like the little girl whom he raised and then told to get something to eat, or with the feeding of over 5000 listeners with two fish and five barley loaves.

This concern about food reaches a much higher level in the Gospel of St. John. This is the Gospel that is so much more poetic and metaphorical than the others. This is the Gospel where Jesus makes all the "I am..." statements.

The Gospel today begins with Jesus making an "I am" statement. "I am the bread of life that came down from heaven."

This confounded the people listening to him who knew him merely as a carpenter's son. Later in today's Gospel He says "I am the bread of life", followed by another statement: "I am the living bread".

Some might say that He was speaking metaphorically, that He is "like" bread. Jesus, as we will hear in the next two weeks, clearly states that He is not "like" food, but that He truly "is" food; bread and wine – body and blood.

Today, Jesus speaks to us in the words of the Angel to Elijah "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!"

In these words we understand that our labor is not yet finished – but that we are fortified to do it. We are nourished and no longer starving. We are strong and no longer weak. We are free to give up the ways of the starving and the weak, where our minds and hearts are focused on just surviving. We are free to live an abundant life. The journey still remains, but it will not overcome us. We live in a new confidence.

With Jesus as food, we are able to climb above our basic needs and become the person we are meant to be.

God fed the people in the desert with manna. They eventually died, many of them before they saw the Promised Land.

Jesus feeds us with a form of manna as well, but when we eat the bread, we will not die. We know our bodies will pass away, but our souls, the very essence of who we are, live on. And at the Resurrection, our bodies will live on as well. That is what is meant when we say in our Creed that “I believe in the Resurrection of the dead”

But the fruit of the Eucharistic food is both Eternal.... and for the here and now. It is, as Christ proclaims “for the life of the world”.

Like Olympic athletes, we are in training for something that will help to define us. Like Tour riders, we must eat, and eat it often if we are going to make it through the mountains and the valleys in life.

Once we have been fed the Panis Angelicus, the Bread of the Angels we can start to truly live as victors, as champions. We can “fight the good fight” and “run the good race” as St Paul puts it elsewhere.

Once fed by Christ with Christ, we can be, in the words of Paul today:

Kind to one another, compassionate, and forgiving one another. We will be strengthened to become imitators of God, The hungry will be fed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for, the lost found and the crown of Glory will be won.

And that is an awards ceremony I do not intend to miss.