Manna: what is this stuff? And literally, that is what the word means, or rather words, in Hebrew. It comes from two Hebrew words—ma and hu—literally meaning what's this?. It’s the what's this? stuff... the whatchamacallit? stuff. It is a question born from a wondering attentiveness to mystery as much as it is from a need to know. Apart from all the theories as to what it was—whether it was some sort of plant resin from the tamarisk tree or some type of insect excretion that was and is nutritious to eat—the point seems to be that the people did not know what it was and it mystified and amazed them. They could only say that somehow God was at work in their midst. If only they persevered in that reverential attitude and mindset, but they could not.

Though they had seen the mighty works of God who led them out of Egypt dry-shod through the sea, and though they had seen the mighty works of God who vanquished their ancient foes, and though they had seen the works of God who fed them mysteriously on their journey to the promised land, they could not keep from wondering whether God was really with them. “Would that we had died at the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!” So the Israelites complain against God and Moses.

It’s the biblical version of what have you done for me lately syndrome. Though they had witnessed the power of God in their midst, they soon forgot and turned in on themselves and lost their faith and trust in God. Perhaps they truly wanted to know the plan that God had for them; wanted to see the map that would lead them through the wilderness, instead of trusting that the Lord God would do as he promised.

This is not a peculiar attitude to the ancient Israelites. This is part and parcel of the human condition. Instead of hoping we become cynical. Instead of trusting we begin to complain. Instead of stepping out in faith, we sit on our backsides and whine.

Jesus himself understands the real reason that the people are seeking him out, and it is because their bellies are full, and they want some more. It is not because they believe in him as the fullest expression of the presence of God on earth, the manifestation of the Torah itself, the actual Manna from heaven walking among them. They just want more food. They want to sit by their fleshpots in their own metaphorical Egyptians. Jesus, of course, begins to challenge that superficial and hardly faithful approach to one’s religious journey and thus begins the great Bread of Life discourse from John 6, which we will continue to hear over the next few weeks in the liturgy.

The people’s response to Jesus is going to be a version of Man-hu, what’s this?, but from the negative point of view. “Who are you to claim the things you say about yourself?” The words of the gospel today emphasize that point: “What
sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do?” It is not a question prompted by trusting abandonment to the power of God in their midst or a reverential attitude that claims not to know more about a given reality than is possible when dealing with the things of God. It is an attitude born of entitlement, skepticism, cynicism, lack of faith and hope: what have you done for me lately? It is an irreverent attitude and mindset, and it is one that somehow does not pertain to a bygone age. It is with us even today.

A parishioner told me that she had a non-Catholic friend who said to her that if he believed that Christ were really present in the Eucharist, as we claim to believe—and which he flatly claimed not to believe—then his only response would be to throw himself on his knees every time as he approached any church where Christ was present in the Eucharist. Wow!!! And Christ is lucky if he even gets a quick Amen and bow of the head when we approach.

Now this man’s statement is one of hyperbole and exaggeration, but it makes a profound point and it is that you and I who live in a hyper-cynical and hyper-skeptical and super-entitled society have to do everything in our power to counteract that. And you and I who have access to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—must not let it become just a commonplace, run-of-the-mill experience. You all know the phrase, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Sometimes, I think as Roman Catholics, and our weekly and daily routine of the celebration of the Eucharist at Mass, we can become too familiar; it becomes too much a thing of rote (routine). We do not approach the sacrament with the reverential awe (fear and trembling) that the non-Catholic’s statement which I earlier quoted implies. Sometimes, we come at the Sacrament with the what have you done for me lately? sense of entitlement instead of the question that the Israelites asked, born of true reverence and entrance into Mystery itself, when they encountered God on their journey through the wilderness: What’s this?

We are not called to throw ourselves upon our knees (except during the Eucharistic prayer), but we could do well to seriously evaluate our attitude and mindset. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, a 4th century father of the Church, in his catechesis about receiving the Eucharist said this: “When you go to receive communion go not with your wrists extended, nor with your fingers separated, but placing your left hand as a throne for your right, which is to receive so great a King, and in the hollow of the palm receive the body of Christ, saying, Amen.” What a profoundly beautiful image: to form our hands into a throne, to so dispose ourselves as if a king, a monarch, were to take his seat upon our hands, our tongue, our heart.

What the writer of the letter to the Ephesians, the second reading, wrote is as applicable today as it was nearly 2,000 years ago: Read 2nd reading in entirety.