

Seventeenth Sunday of the Year July 26, 2015

2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

Our God is a personal God who is concerned about each and every one and takes care of his people. He is like a benevolent Father caring for the needs of his children and planning a future of each one. The Bible presents us the story of a benevolent God who took care of his chosen people in the Old Testament leading them through the desert and being with them when they were attacked by their enemies. He gave people the bread sufficient to satisfy their hunger and made them comfortable. In the New Testament we have the love of God manifested in Jesus. He leads them to faith and gives them his own body and blood as proper spiritual nourishment. He promises them that he who eats his flesh and drinks his blood will never die. The Gospel of today begins with the narrative that Jesus is being followed by a very large crowd as he came to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The people had heard his teaching, had seen his miracles and had experienced his personality. He realized that they were all hungry and took upon himself the responsibility to take care of them and fed five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish. In the first reading we hear the prophet of God feeding many people from just a few loaves of bread, indicating that there is no limit to God's resources. All the people had enough to eat and there was extra food remaining. In the second reading Paul a prisoner of the Lord, urges the community to live as one. They have to bear with one another in love and strive to live in peace. He invites them to do all they can to preserve the unity in spirit.

In today's First Reading, we heard of the advantages enjoyed by people of faith. Here we have the story of a man, perhaps a farmer who brought food from the first fruits to Elisha, the man of God. This generosity was in obedience to the word of God to his people through Moses to offer to God the choicest of the first fruits. It was possible that land was experiencing a famine but someone through faith had enjoyed a good harvest. United with God's people and trusting in the Lord, Elisha commanded that the food although limited to just twenty loaves, must be given to all the people. Hearing this, the servant questioned how a hundred persons could be fed with so little food. Elisha remained confident and assured the servant that God will provide. Keeping in mind the providential care of God, Prophet Elisha repeated his command, and asked the servant to give it to the people and let them eat, for the Lord has said that they shall eat and have some left. The servant obeyed and the people had enough to eat and there was plenty left over. Again we see the role of Prophet Elisha who shared the fruits with those in need, and the servant who distributed the food to the one hundred persons who ate it, indicated the generous nature of God towards his own people. Through these actions the people realized the working of God and obeyed his will. Such is the bounty available to people of faith and we perceive God's care towards his chosen people. This indicates also the joy of generous giving and the joy of receiving.

Paul in today's Second Reading, invites his Ephesian converts to live a life worthy of the calling to which they have been given, in humility, in gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. These words echo the Christian actions of the people as referred to in the Old Testament. Paul calls himself as the prisoner of the Lord and asks all live a life worthy of their calling. Each one has a call received from Christ from the beginning and what is expected of each is his fidelity to this invitation. By this he indicates that through Christ who died for the sins of all, every individual has been freed from the slavery of sin to be reunited with God. Now Paul tells them that they are all indebted to Jesus. Thanks to the promises of

God that all Christians have received through Christ one faith and one Baptism, to unite all in a bond of peace so that they can love in a manner worthy of the call. In thanksgiving to God for his abounding grace, all are called to live our living faith in Christ as one in the Spirit of the Lord. He tells them that a prisoner does not have his free will. He is bound by rules and norms and he has to follow them seriously. Similarly, a young child is required to obey his parents, or a slave is required to obey his master. The young children have a free will to do as they please and the slaves have too. But, if they fail to obey, they can expect loving discipline to correct them until they will obey. We are called to be united as one in the Spirit of Christ.

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels. The introduction gives us the setting and the time. Jesus is on the mountain with his disciples and the feast of the Passover is near. There is a crowd of people who have followed Jesus to this location, attracted by the signs he was doing. The mountain is the place that reminds us of the closeness to God and recalls to mind how Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law. What had begun in Moses is going to be fulfilled in Jesus. A problem develops around the issue of food. The large crowd needs to eat but there are hardly any provisions available in its proximity. Jesus himself raises the issue, but only to test his disciples. He is fully in charge and he is aware beforehand how the problem is going to be solved. We also have the dialogue between Jesus and Philip, who always comes across as rather naive and simple. Jesus asks the question that is simple and natural, where will they as a community get food sufficient for all these people in the desert. Philip responds saying that two hundred denarii would not be enough for each to have a little, indicating a situation practically impossible in human terms. Andrew too comes into the picture. They also tell him those five barley loaves and two fish that are available and this is next to nothing in the face of what is needed. Jesus uses these limited things to feed five thousand persons and they had enough and more to eat. This may seem humanly impossible, but when God is pleased with his children, nothing is impossible. The source of the food is the little boy that gave up his food for Jesus to share it with the others. We also heard that the disciples obeyed Jesus and did whatever he asked them to do. They had faith in their master and their task was to obey.

Jesus proceeded to do two things: First, he had the crowd of over five thousand and he asked the disciples to make the people to sit down on the grass as if they were preparing to have a meal. Secondly, after giving thanks Jesus himself fed the entire crowd with the five barley loaves and two fish. We are only told that Jesus did this and we are not told how he did it. Not only was everyone fed, but there were twelve baskets of fragments left over. These people are those who were united in the Spirit in obedience and ate as much as they wanted. This action of Jesus is a sign which reveals something about him on a very deep level. He is the bread of life and he feeds his people. The story is filled with Eucharistic overtones. Passover celebrates the gift of manna and here Jesus celebrates the bread of life. Even the word fragments were used early on in the church to refer to the Eucharistic bread. This miracle leads the people to make their profession of faith. They want immediately to make Jesus a King perhaps seeing in him the prophetic signs of Moses. Jesus himself will have nothing to do with their scheme. The understanding of the people of a Messiah does not match up with who Jesus really is.

Some even stress that the “miracle” that took place because of the boy’s generosity which resulted in many others generously sharing what food they had brought with the strangers around them. Again this was based on the teaching of Jesus on love and charity and sharing with others what little they have. It does require a kind of miracle to break through people’s self-centeredness and their concern for their own security. Normally the law of life centers

round self and does not go beyond. Selfishness often dominates our life. The little boy broke the ice by giving what little he had. People are dying of hunger and malnutrition in our world, not because of a lack of food but because of poor distribution. The food is there; it is the will to share it or the means to produce it that is lacking. This is the charity and sharing Jesus taught in the miracle. This is what Paul told Corinthians when spoke to them on Eucharist. He used strong words to tell Christians who wanted to celebrate the Eucharist but refused to help the needy members of their community. This may look a bit strange yet we see that the Eucharist that we are celebrating every day is also about giving, about loving and about sharing. The bread which has been offered by all is blessed at the consecration, then broken and divided and given out to all.

This miracle serves as an introduction for a long discourse on Jesus as the Bread of Life. John begins by telling us that Jesus crossed over to the opposite shore of the Lake of Galilee and that he was followed by a large crowd. They had walked a long distance to see Jesus. John says it was because they saw the signs that Jesus was doing and for healing those who were sick. This is likely an expression of the deep hunger and longing of people for healing and wholeness in their lives. At the same time, it could also be interpreted in a purely selfish and curious sense, the way people will flock in crowds after hearing about some “miraculous” event. John does not speak about his teaching ministry as the Synoptic Gospels do. But he mentions of the proximity of the Passover festival and Jesus using the occasion to feed the people in hunger. The Passover was the great feast when the Jews each year celebrated their liberation from slavery in Egypt and God’s leading them into freedom to the Promised Land. Today’s scene is an anticipation of the new Passover where Jesus will be the central figure and where Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection will be the liberation from sin and death.

Often we miss a special task of Jesus in this episode. In the Synoptic Gospels, it is the disciples who are told to distribute the bread and fish among the people. But here in John, it is Jesus himself who distributes: John is soon going to record Jesus’ words about his being the Living Bread which gives life to the world. Even though there are intermediaries, it is always Jesus himself who comes to us in Word and Eucharist. John wants to emphasize that Jesus is the source of all nourishment, spiritual and material. He personally shares himself even today. The immediate reaction of the people is to make him their King, Messiah. Jesus’ response is to flee into the hills. He escapes the temptation to power and stays away from such a situation. We ask the grace from Jesus to be of service to all and continue the mission of Jesus. A mother wanted to teach her daughter a lesson about giving. She gave the little girl a quarter and a dollar for church. “Put whichever one you want in the collection plate and keep the other for yourself,” she told the girl. When they were coming out of church, the mother asked her daughter which amount she had given. “Well,” said the little girl, “I was going to give the dollar, but just before the collection the man in the pulpit said that we should all be cheerful givers. I knew I’d be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter, so I did.”

Although Jesus had the intention of preparing the minds of the multitude for his discourse on the heavenly food which he would make the following day, his principal motive in working this miracle was pity and compassion. He was fully aware that they were all hungry including his own disciples. They had been away from their homes for a few days already. They were willing to suffer this inconvenience but he did not want them to do so. Even though he was aware that some among them would not accept him and some may join his enemies at a later date, yet he made no distinction. He had compassion on all. This miracle convinces us that Jesus is interested in our daily needs too just as he was interested in those of his contemporaries in Palestine. He is there willing to help us and comes to us in our needs. This

does not mean that we can expect or demand a miracle whenever we are in need. Those persons in the deserted place had not asked Jesus to feed them. Jesus took the initiative to care for them and satisfy their needs. But more importantly they looked for his presence and wanted to remain close to him. Like the bread and fish distributed in the gospel of today, we do not deserve anything from God. What we receive is from his bounty and gratuitousness and gladly accept them.

We have the story of a church that was built way in the highest mountains of Switzerland. It was a beautiful church that had been built with great care by the villagers who lived nearby. But there was one thing that the church didn't have. It didn't have any lights. Yet every Sunday evening the people who lived on the mountain-side opposite the tiny church saw something magic happen. The church bell would ring and worshippers would wind their way up the mountainside towards the church. They would enter the church and then all of a sudden the church would light up brightly. In reality the people had to bring light with them - so they brought lanterns. When they arrived at church they would light their lanterns and hang them around the church on pegs set in the walls, so the light would spread all around. If only a few people came to church the light would be very dim because there would only be a few lanterns. But when lots of people came to church there would be plenty of light. After the service the villagers would take their lanterns home. At this time, to those who watched from a distance, it was as if a stream of light poured out of the church and over the mountainside. For many it was a sign that all was well. God's light was with them and in them. The only time the little church lit up was when people were there. That's when it truly became a church.

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