

B. 17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B/2006

It is sometimes important to ask ourselves questions about our religion and the way we deal with it. What is our religion interested in, only in the world of the future or in the things of this world? Has religion anything to say about bread and life in this world or is it concerned only with heaven? Is religion a matter of spiritual or material realities? Do our very needs like physical health and hunger interest God? How does he respond to our needs when we ask for something? Is he ready to work miracles so that we do not have to toil or is he expecting us to cooperate with his plan? How do we conceive of such cooperation?

To answer these questions, we need to look closely at today's readings. In fact, people have often believed that religion has nothing to do with material things. However, the readings of this Sunday seem to tell us that material things like bread or hunger is also a spiritual problem. The first reading approaches this theme through the generous act of a man from Baal-shalishah who, in a time of famine, gave the prophet Elisha twenty barley loaves. Instead of keeping the precious food for himself, the prophet shares it with hundred people who were with him.

The prophet makes such a decision out of faith and confidence that God who has given the opportunity to provide with some bread in such a difficult situation is also able not only to supply to the needs of his people, but also to multiply that bread so that there may be plenty of food for all. The intent that lies behind this text is to teach Israel that its survival depends on God alone. It teaches also that in hardships and desperate situations God is always able to open even a small window to let fresh air enter a closed house. As psalm 23 says: "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. Even when I walk through a dark valley, he is always with me". The condition for that is simple, namely to trust his unfailing word and his promise of being with us till the end of time.

The same trust in God is behind the gesture of Jesus in today's Gospel as he multiplies five barley loaves and two fish to feed five thousand people. The background of this text reminds us the episode of the manna in the desert, where through the intercession of Moses, God fed at fill his people. In the same way, by nourishing the people, Jesus presents himself as a new Moses who is leading humanity in a new exodus and guides it from slavery to freedom. While the goal of Moses was to lead Israel to the Promise Land, Jesus leads to the kingdom where, as announced by the prophet (Is 25,6), all will have plenty of food.

That is the reason why Jesus feeds the crowd in order to show the people that the expected kingdom of heaven is already operative among them; that through him, God is accomplishing the promise he made to the prophets to take care of his people and to lead them to the fullness of joy.

Those who are invited to this kingdom are, first of all, the poor and the needy who cannot find consolation and help but in God. To those God promises the bettering of their sorry situation and the improvement of their condition. Such an understanding finds its foundation in today's Gospel on the fact that the bread that was multiplied was made of barley. And yet, we know that this was the food of the poor, since the rich used wheat bread. So, the time has come to make a feast, because the kingdom where the poor will have plenty of bread has begun; God will change their affliction to joy and their mourning to dance.

Moreover, that the multiplied bread comes from a young boy means that the Kingdom of heaven belong to the child-like, who trust God no matter what they go through and the situation in which they are.

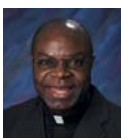
The bread that the poor have in abundance will not, however, come from heaven, but from their brothers and sisters who have more. Jesus shows this fact clearly by multiplying, not the bread he has produced, but that a little boy from the crowd has brought.

As we can see, Jesus' intention is to teach the disciples and us alike that it is only when people put together what they possess, as ability or wealth, at the disposition of their fellow humans that the big problems of humanity can be resolved. In other words, the only way to free people from hunger is not to act selfishly by keeping the goods we have for ourselves, but by putting them at the disposal of all. If there is no generous acts of persons who offer the fruit of their works for the needy, if there is no good will to share with those who have not, our world will hardly change its face. We can have a new world only when people no longer base their relationship on selfishness and self-interests.

Why then shall the Disciples of Christ share with their brothers and sisters what they possess? As St Paul said in the second reading, the reason is that Christians form a unity, they are one body and have one Lord, one faith and one baptism. Unity is founded on the principle that all people make up the one family of the children of God; they form only one body in Christ and are animated by the same spirit. Consequently, Christians should live in solidarity, reciprocal assistance and complementarity. Another reason lies in the importance of Eucharist for the Christian community. How can the Disciples of Christ break the Eucharistic bread together if they are not first ready to share with their sisters and brothers their material bread? The fact that the multiplication of bread and fish is done with the words we use during the consecration in the mass shows that the Eucharist is above all a place of sharing.

Let me finish by saying that although God's kingdom will reach its fullness at the end of time, we have, however, to anticipate it right now, on earth. By multiplying the bread and fish to feed the people of his followers, Jesus teaches us that the new humanity, in which all people can satisfy their basic needs, has already begun on this earth. Anytime that people strive to alleviate the suffering and the pain of their fellow humans, they anticipate the kingdom of God on earth; anytime that people wipe away the tears that flow from the face of the afflicted, the abandoned and the needy, they bring heaven close to earth; anytime that people struggle to eradicate disease and famine from the surface of the earth, they anticipate God's kingdom.

Such a statement means also that, although it is God who saves, he needs our cooperation. He acts through us and saves through us. Salvation comes from God, but its actualization and anticipation on earth comes with human beings. May God bless each one of us and fill us with his Holy Spirit so that we become instruments he uses to bring happiness and the joy of his kingdom to others. May God bless you all!



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