

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's care for his people. They show that God is the one who nourishes us materially and spiritually. They invite us to entrust our lives to God and to receive from him the nourishment that we really need.

The first reading of Exodus recalls the contrasting experience of the people of Israel in the desert. In fact, in the middle of their suffering, the people of Israel started grumbling against Moses and Aaron. And as their condition of life in the desert worsened, they regretted having left Egypt where they had food and drink in abundance. But, God in his bounty gave them bread and flesh to eat in order to sustain them in life.

What is behind this text is the idea that God takes care of his people in all their needs. Behind the text is also the idea that the way that leads to freedom is long and difficult. That is why the text shows how the experience of suffering is disconcerting, in the sense that it can lead those who suffer to easily forget the blessings they have received from God. However, whatever might be the grievance the people can have against God, he always responds with love and generosity by taking care of his beloved ones.

This text helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus presents himself to the Jews as the bread of life. First of all, the Gospel says that when the crowd of those Jesus fed did not see him in their town, they went on looking for him in Capernaum.

As they found him, Jesus confronted them with the truth that their motivation was purely human, because he once fed them. At the same time, Jesus invited them to work for the food that endures for eternal life and which only he can give. At their reaction in order to know what they should do to accomplish the work of God, Jesus calmly responded that they should have faith in him who fed them.

But, not content with Jesus' answer, they questioned his credibility by referring to Moses as the one who really fed their ancestors in the desert. At that, Jesus stated the whole truth of his identity as the true bread from heaven.

In this regard, it was not Moses who fed their ancestors, but God himself who gave them the bread from heaven. Moreover, the bread that the ancestors ate was just a symbol of the true bread which comes from heaven and which the Father provides in order to give life to the world. That is why Jesus could say: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst".

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the prevalence of spiritual food over material food. As a matter of fact, the motivation that led Jesus to multiply the loaves and fish in order to feed the people, as we heard last Sunday, was that he took seriously their material needs and their hunger. For that reason, we can say that Jesus gives justification to everything we do in the world in order to provide for our needs and those of our families and fellows.

In that sense working hard, striving to satisfy our needs and earning our living by the sweat of our brow, is something legitimate we cannot stop doing. It would even be a sign of negligence and a lack of gratitude to God, by eating the bread we did not earn by our strength. However, as legitimate as such a quest might be, we should not live only for the satisfaction of human needs. Life is more than the satisfaction of the

material bread. A life well lived is that which transcends the limits of the earthly and leads us to God.

That is the reason why Jesus told the crowd of those who were looking for him to work not for the food that perishes, but for that which endures for eternal life. By saying so, Jesus does not despise human food or material needs as though they were not important. On the contrary, what he wants is that those who follow him appreciate the things of this world in the limit of their use as a means of sustaining us in life until the day we will share in God's banquet in heaven. In that perspective, it is important to remember that there are two kinds of hunger, namely physical hunger that physical food can satisfy and the spiritual hunger that only God can satisfy.

The second thing I want to highlight is about the power of symbolism. In fact, in today's Gospel, there are words that resonate powerfully in the mind of the Jewish listeners of Jesus than they do for us. First of all, when Jesus tells the crowd that the food that endures for eternal life is given by him on whom the Father has set his seal, his listeners understood that he was making himself capable of satisfying human hunger. That is the reason why they directly made a comparison with Moses and the manna.

But, in truth, Jesus was not referring to human hunger, but rather to himself as the one who is capable of satisfying the spiritual hunger of the world. That is why the bread and fish he multiplied prior to this conversation pointed to the power he has received from his Father to give life to anyone who comes to him.

It is in that sense we have to understand the other words Jesus uses when he says that he is "the bread of life" or that "the true bread is that which comes from heaven in order to give life". It is that giving of life we celebrate in the sacrament of the Eucharist. That is why the Eucharist is the sacrament of the presence of Jesus through which he comes to us and gives us life.

In order to have access to the full understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist we need faith. Once again, it is not faith understood as knowledge of God and his things, but rather as trust in God and Jesus' words. Without trust in God and his word, we will never come to the whole truth of the mystery of the Eucharist, because what is perceived with our senses remains external. It is only from within, when we give our heart to God, that we can cope with the mystery of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us to believe in him and trust him. Let us ask him to give us the grace to receive him today in the Holy Eucharist so that one day we may come to share in his heavenly banquet. May God bless you!

Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15; Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24; John 6: 24-35



Homily Date: August 5, 2012

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Document Name: 20120805homily.pdf