

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns. When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have here." Then he said, "Bring them here to me," and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over – twelve wicker baskets full. Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.

REFLECTION 1:

FEEDING EVERY HUNGER

Many of us will readily recall the images on our TV screens of the devastating famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s. The BBC reporter, Michael Buerk, described the horror enfolding as far as the eye could see over a parched land, amid scenes of death and dying all around. Later, through massive fund raising, planes flew over the famine stricken area with enough food for tens of thousands of hungry people. Slogans from the Aid Agencies announced that it took only \$15 to feed a child for a month and pleaded for donations – now. It reminds us of what people will say to Jesus at the Last Judgement, 'When Lord will we see you hungry and feed you? The king will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you do this for the least important of these, you did it for me' (Matt. 25).

Repeated six times in the four Gospels, the feeding of the multitude attests to the fact that Jesus met people's real needs. He fed the multitude not with metaphors but with food, not with resolutions and commissions but with so much bread and fish that there was an abundance left over. Jesus met their physical needs in a generous moment, so that having their physical hunger satisfied he could then address the hunger of their hearts. Through his action, Jesus acknowledged that there is a real connection between the hunger of the body and the hunger of the soul. Both the physical and spiritual needs are God's concern.

In our first reading (Isaiah 55: 1-3) Isaiah, speaking for God, invites the poor to come, eat, drink and be satisfied. Only after their physical hunger has been addressed are they assured of God's protection and presence forever. The land of God's promise was always described in terms of food, the manna in the desert, quail and water from the rock that sustained the desert wanderers in their pursuit of a land of milk and honey. The evangelists recognized Jesus and his desire to feed the hungers of others as Wisdom-made flesh. In that capacity, Jesus fed us through the bread of his teaching and ultimately through the gift of himself as the Living Bread in the Eucharist. The weekly Eucharist challenges all who are fed to give not only of their surplus but also of their substance to feed the hungry of the world, 'our daily bread'.

Mother Teresa said that 'we have only today to make Jesus known, loved, fed, clothed, sheltered. The hungry Christ comes to us in distressing disguise. Do not wait for tomorrow'.

REFLECTION 2:

'GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT'

There is something very intimate about eating with another person. It is more than merely satisfying one's hunger for food and quenching one's thirst. Sharing a meal fulfils the hunger for human contact and interaction. It can be a sign of friendship and respect, even love. Families and friends enjoy each others' company and exchange intimacies over a meal. People from all walks of life are honoured at banquets. There is more than eating that goes on at table.

On the last Sunday in July, every year, great crowds gather, and people come from all corners of Ireland, to climb Croagh Patrick, our holy mountain. About twenty thousand from all age groups make their way to the summit of this 2,500 feet mountain. Whatever the weather, there is a great feeling of solidarity and friendliness to be found in that experience. It is a mountain that cries out to be climbed and people have been doing so well before the coming of the Christian Gospel and the traditions of St. Patrick. As a high place it speaks of being nearer to God and it calls people away from the grind of daily life. It shows us how to get life into perspective and to understand the true values of our pilgrim journey.

After outlining through parables the perspective of God's kingdom, Jesus like a new Moses, withdrew with his disciples to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. He wanted to show the people who had followed him with enthusiasm that God can always satisfy their deepest hunger, as he had formerly done in the desert and make them into a people built on faith. A striking summary of what will later be their role in the Church is contained in the order Jesus gives his disciples: 'Give them something to eat yourselves!' (Matthew 14: 13-21).

The disciples thought at first that they would be able to pass on to others, the task of feeding the hungry crowds. But instead it is they who must do it, even if they have to do it with the slender provisions of five loaves and two fish. A real act of worship takes place in which Jesus is the central figure and the apostles are the necessary ministers. They bring their offerings, their presentation, Jesus says the blessing – an act of thanksgiving over the gifts – 'the work of human hands'. Notice how the distribution of the food is by Jesus to the apostles and by them, to the crowds. How true it is that the Church will never lack, in the desert of this world, the Eucharistic bread multiplied by the ministry of the twelve.

All will eat and be satisfied and yet twelve baskets of fragments will be gathered up for the table of the Lord. The Sunday Eucharist is not about fast food for the soul. It is good to take time for it, so as to emphasise for ourselves and our families that it is a special time for being together. We need only to hunger and believe, in order to be made one with this act of pity and of sharing, bringing the tenderness of God even to us!