

## SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

*Gospel: John 6:1-15*

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

### REFLECTION 1:

### THE BREAD OF LIFE

Today's Gospel is a wonderful assurance that Jesus is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world. The Gospel for today (John 6: 1-15) tells us that with almost no resources, Jesus was determined to feed the crowd. This he did with style, miraculously and abundantly. In fact the scraps left over were more than what he started with. Those who ate the meal were so impressed that they wanted to make Jesus their king.

The story of the great sharing of the loaves and fishes is the most repeated story of the New Testament, related six times by the Gospel writers. Of these, the account of the evangelist John is the most theological. John will devote the whole of chapter six of his Gospel to explain Jesus' teaching and action. This is the first of five Gospel readings we will hear in the coming Sundays from what is known as 'the Bread of Life Discourse or teaching'. The Evangelist points out that the reason why the people are following Jesus is that they have seen the signs and heard the teachings he uttered, even though there is little indication that his hearers understood them – Jesus' explanation of his mission being too much for them to bear. Only his closest disciples remained, to hear Jesus ask, 'Do you also want to leave me?' To which Simon replies in the words, 'Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life' (6:68).

The scene opens with the crowd following Jesus, even though he and his disciples are trying to get a break from the hectic pressures placed on them, with people wanting cures and to hear Jesus speak. Instead of promptly dismissing them he allows the throng of people to follow him to a place today named Tagba on the other side of the Seas of Galilee. So, Jesus sits down 'on the mountain' – a reference to Moses who receives God's Law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24) and is regarded as Israel's greatest teacher. John also mentions that it is near the time of Passover, a hint here of their Exodus journey that promised both necessary food and liberation. Notice that the Gospel points out that Jesus first 'raised his eyes' – the implication being that Jesus was engaged in a special prayer before embarking on an important action.

Because John's Gospel does not have an account of the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper this can be seen as a Eucharistic account. This is especially evident in the details of the long explanation after the feeding and the fact that the fragments were to be gathered up at the end of the meal, 'collect the pieces so that nothing may be lost'. John tells us that Jesus' first concern had to do with the need for nourishment – both physical and spiritual so, he calls on Philip, who was from that area, to ask where they might find food for the crowd. Philip's reply was that it would take almost a year's wages to provide enough food for so many. Then Andrew came up with a solution, there was a boy nearby who had five barley loaves and a few fish. So Jesus asks the crowd to sit down on the grass, an allusion to the verdant pastures of Psalm 23. John then simply says that Jesus gave thanks (eucharistia) and that he himself distributed the bread and fish to the people. Finally, he had the disciples gather up twelve baskets of the fragments – another reminder of the manna in the desert.

The crowd was fed, they saw what Jesus was doing, but did not understand the impact of the event. They might have thought of it as a sign – a truth that does not deny the reality of the event, but recognises it as a gift of God rather than a violation of any physical law. The people recognised Jesus as a prophet but their response was to try and carry him off and compel him to be their king – their political leader and provider – a prospect that Jesus fled, by withdrawing up the mountain.

During the next few weeks that follow this Sunday's gospel, Jesus will attempt to teach the people the significance of their experience, that he himself is the bread come down from Heaven and not the magical provider of everything they want, but the genuine source of all they will ever need.

## **REFLECTION 2: GOD PROVIDES**

Today we remember the most famous picnic of all time. The crowd was estimated at 5,000 souls. Did it include women and children? We know one child who played a key role, a small boy. All four Gospels report a version of their own and today we take a look at the evangelist John's account. These reporters on the life of Christ were master storytellers deeply immersed in the Semitic tradition. Only in John's Gospel we read today (John 6:1–15) do we find the miracles of Jesus referred to as signs. Of all the great acts performed by Jesus, John selected only seven signs to herald the good news. Each sign should be understood as a means of personal encounter with Jesus as Lord. In each sign a challenge is issued to observers who are urged to go beyond the sign and believe in the one whom the sign has revealed. Here Jesus is revealed as bread, bread given for the life of the world. Each sign has been closely associated with one of the Jewish holy feasts and John demonstrates the fact that Jesus has replaced the meaning and significance of these feasts with his very self. The evangelist has woven Eucharistic motifs into this fourth sign on the occasion of the Jewish feast of Passover – the feast of unleavened bread. For instance, John relates this sign of Jesus with the event that made Israel a people. Jesus is the new Moses, the mountain is reminiscent of Sinai and the questioning of Philip recalls the testing in the desert. Of course the more obvious association is the link between the manna in the wilderness and the bread Jesus gave. There is also however a remarkable difference, indicating that the sign effected by Jesus is far greater than the manna of old. When the people in the desert gathered the manna, they had sufficient food for the day but no surplus and those who hoarded the manna found that it spoiled over night. But when Jesus gave his weary and hungry followers bread all were filled and had plenty left over. Isaiah the prophet describes the era of the messiah as a time of plenty and prosperity especially for the poor who hungered for justice. Jesus' action feeds with banquet-like portions the poor ones who have come to him.

Unique to the fourth Gospel was the reaction of the crowd who declared, 'This is the prophet.' But they misread the sign and looked on Jesus as a political king who would alleviate their economic situation and provide national sovereignty. Jesus rejected their enthusiasm until they would hunger for him, the real bread of life. Later in John's Gospel Jesus declares himself to be the bread and food for all. This becomes clear when everyone witnesses his fragmentation and brokenness on the cross. Those who eat the bread of life are gathered together at the sharing and become responsible to one another. If

others are hungry, it is we who must buy some bread and being replete must break the greater bread of life so that the millions, who are hungry throughout the world today, may hunger no more.