

THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Gospel: Luke 9:11-17

The crowds followed Jesus; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish-unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each."

They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

REFLECTION 1:

TO BE FED AS TO FEED

Sharing a meal at table helps illustrate the beauty of love and friendship. Some things decrease as they are shared - like the food on the table that has to be divided into smaller portions as the number of guests increases. But love multiplies by the same equation as each new arrival adds their gifts to the mix. Our Eucharistic meal works its mysterious multiplier effect in our communities. There is always enough God to go around, and the love of Jesus is the one gift that increases the more it is given away.

The multiplication of the loaves is the only miracle common to all four Gospels. In the Lucan gospel (Luke 9: 11 – 17) the episode may be understood as part of the evangelist's answer to the question posed by Herod immediately preceding today's gospel: 'Who is this man about whom I hear all these reports?' (9:9). By following Herod's question with the loaves story, Luke has provided an answer that describes the man Jesus in prophetic terms. Those who witnessed the event were no doubt reminded of the prophet Elisha who worked a similar wonder with 20 loaves of bread for 100 men. Elisha's action bore witness to the mighty deeds of God for whom he spoke. Early Christians also looked upon the sign of the loaves as fulfilment of the Old Testament promise concerning God's feeding his people.

Jesus' feeding of the crowds was a sign of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. Luke had already mentioned that Jesus had been teaching the crowds about the reign of God and the healing of those in need. Both the actions of healing and the provision of abundant food for the hungry were looked upon as messianic signs. Statements like 'all ate until they had enough' reflected the bounty associated with the messiah's reign. In the Johannine Gospel, following the event we are told the people rushed at Jesus to make him king (John 6: 15) but Jesus eluded them knowing that his kingdom was to be exercised in far different manner than had been popularly anticipated. Luke however points out that the nature of Jesus' messiahship was not merely a sensational display of royal power but a saving process that would include suffering for the messianic king and his would-be followers.

Christian believers attached a Eucharistic significance to Jesus' action, taking raised eyes, blessed, broke, and gave, similar words used at the last supper and at the meal at Emmaus and after the resurrection on the beach of the Sea of Tiberius. At these meals, all who believed were believed were fed and were healed, the food being offered to saints and sinners alike. After the people had eaten to their satisfaction, the fragments that remained were collected, enough to fill 12 baskets. That there was so much left over was the sign of God's abundance, the number 12 recalling the 12 tribes as well as the 12 apostles who were to be leaders of the new Israel. The Eucharist implication of the loaves event teaches a serious lesson to our 21st century Eucharist assembly. In a word, liturgy of the bread is not the end of sharing but a summons to greater sharing with the world's hungry and starving. Jesus' words to his disciples were, 'You yourselves give them something to eat' His words are now a modern-day inspiration and challenge to us to resolve the world hunger crisis.

REFLECTION 2:

'GIVE THEM YOURSELVES'

For the most part, Europe today is a continent of abundance. This places a special burden on us to care that the rest of the world has enough to eat. Today's Gospel Reading from Luke (Lk 9: 11-17) about the multiplication of food concerns not only what Jesus does to the loaves and fish, rather it is what impact it has on Jesus' disciples. Jesus can provide, but he asks us also to share in the miracle. Today when we face the problem of world hunger, Jesus turns to each of us and says, 'Give them some food yourselves' (v. 13).

This miraculous event recalls another biblical scene, the miraculous feeding of the Israelites with manna in the desert on their journey to the Land of Promise. Jesus is training the Twelve for mission, sending them out in twos to spread the good news of salvation. He is telling them to trust - God will look after their physical needs. Now they are to act as waiters, distributing food for a massive crowd, 5000 men, not counting women and children. The disciples were pragmatic, 'send the people away and they can go to the villages and farms round about and they can find lodging and food' after all we are out here in a desert place - 'we are being practical' they might mutter among themselves. They have yet to learn about God's mercy and compassion, so the miracle takes place - all are replete, even 12 baskets left over of scraps. That number could be symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel and now the 12 disciples of the New Covenant.

We may very well ask, who were these five thousand? This was no holiday picnic, but rather a ragtag gathering of God's Anawim, the desperate poor who had no control over their lives - like sheep without a shepherd, now following an itinerant preacher into a desert without resources. Palestinians, somewhat like the present time, had little control over their land and resources. Then they were overtaxed by Rome and by Herod and women and children weren't safe from capture and abuse.

Jesus ministers to their needs with a warm welcome, with inspiring words, healing and a satisfying meal.

How uplifting it was that Jesus gave his disciples the job of sharing out the food, later they would be commissioned to nourish people with words of life and healing - to be 'Altar Christus', other Christs, for broken humanity.

Eucharistic images that we have touched upon today are really forerunners off that bind that knits us together in Blessington in our times, especially in our week-end/Sunday masses. We should never absent ourselves from these precious moments with Jesus when we are nourished by word and sacrament with leftovers to sustain us during the coming week.