

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B2018

The readings of this Sunday talk about the human reality of hunger and the importance of food. They show that God is able to provide for us in a very miraculous way when material needs press us. They invite us to prolong God's generosity toward our fellows in need.

The first reading describes the generosity of the prophet Elisha in a difficult time of famine in the country. It shows in particular how, when he received a piece of bread, instead of keeping it for himself, he gave it to the people to eat. The text shows also that in spite of the objection of his servant, he relied on God's providence and shared the bread. Finally, the text describes the liberality of God who multiplies a hundred times what is given to him.

What is behind this text is the idea that God provides for human needs even in most difficult times. Another idea is that sharing with the needy draws God's blessing upon those who are generous with what they possess. The last idea is related to the truth that by practicing generosity, we prolong God's liberality.

This text allows us to understand the point of today's Gospel as Jesus feeds five thousand people with just five loaves and two fish. First of all, the Gospel mentions Jesus and his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee. Then, it talks about the presence of the crowd that was following Jesus because of the signs they saw him performing. It also shows the reaction of Jesus who, at the sight of the crowd, inquired how he could feed them.

After that, the Gospel describes the scene of the multiplication of bread. It shows how, though there were just two fish and five breads that a boy had with him, Jesus ordered to give them to the crowd after blessing them. Finally, the Gospel recalls that everybody ate his fill and the disciples collected twelve baskets of left over.

The Gospel ends up with the astonishment of the people who confessed that Jesus was a prophet. In the end, the Gospel says that as Jesus knew that people wanted to make him a king, he escaped by withdrawing to the mountain.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today, I want to talk about the joy of giving and the reward of blessing. What do I mean by that? Let me explain by starting with an observation. In fact, human life is beautiful, full of moments of joy and rejoicing. But, human life is also difficult, crossed by moments of crisis, conflicts and famine, as we heard in the first reading, even though it is a rare phenomenon for the United States. The only period that is similar to it is the time of the Depression.

Human experience teaches us that in time of abundance, people tend to be generous and in dire time, they tend to be tightfisted. And it is not to farmers I have to teach that, because they know that the abundance of harvest brings a profusion of gifts, while the scarcity of bad season brings a dryness of gifts.

And yet, this time of dryness and scarcity can be a wonderful opportunity and a privileged moment to receive blessings from the Lord. That is exactly what happened in the first reading with the prophet Elisha. It was in a similar time of a bad season and famine that Elisha dared to share his bread with people. As he did so, the food multiplied so that they had more than they thought, including some left over.

But why would Elisha dare to share with others while in so difficult time when people think first for themselves than others? He did so because he believed that God, being the master of the impossible, he can give more than what he had.

That logic is that which presides at the multiplication of bread. First, there is a deep contrast in this Gospel between the attitude of Phillip and that of Andrew and Jesus. That contrast constitutes the point of the Gospel.

For Phillip, what Jesus was asking was impossible. How could someone feed so vast a crowd with almost nothing? Even with the salary of two hundred days of work, it would be difficult to buy enough food for such a crowd. In this perspective, Phillip represents a category of people who look, first of all, at the obstacles lying ahead of their enterprise. They might be realistic in evaluating the possible difficulties in front of them, but such realism can also overlook the power of God to make the impossible possible.

Unlike Phillip, Andrew too was facing the same crowd with the same prospect of impossibility of sufficient food for them. However, he went out and found a boy who had a little bit of food and brought him to Jesus. In this way, he contributed to the making of the miracle possible. In this regard, then, Andrew represents a category of people who, without ignoring the obstacles, still initiate some action in trusting the power of God to make the impossible possible.

Thus, Jesus multiplied the five loaves and two fish that were brought to him and fed the crowd. In doing so, he shows that he takes care of human need. For him, nothing is impossible. The bread is the symbol of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Jesus comes to us and feeds us in strengthening us in our earthly journey. By multiplying the bread the boy brought, and not the disciples, Jesus invites us to share what we have with those who have nothing.

Of course, there has always been a dilemma about what to offer God. Many people still hesitate to offer, because they do not have enough. Others are ashamed about the small amount of what they give. However, any offering, as small as it might be, God can make it big for the glory of his name. He can multiply a hundredfold what we personally consider as insignificant and unworthy of him.

For that reason, we should never hesitate to give. What counts most is not the quantity of what we give, but the quality of the heart that gives. Little is always much in the hands of Jesus. The boy did not have too much to offer, but in what he brought, Jesus found the way of performing a miracle. May God bless you!

2 Kings 4: 42-44; Ephesians 4: 1-6; John 6: 1-15



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