

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B2018

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's care for his people. They show that God is the one who nourishes and sustains us in life. They invite us to long for the spiritual food that gives eternal life and that which only God can give.

The first reading describes the painful experience of hunger of the Israelites in the desert. It shows how, as their conditions of life worsened, they revolted against Moses and Aaron, their leaders. It also shows how God, in his mercy and generosity, responded to their needs for food by providing them with manna.

What is behind this text is the idea that the experience of suffering is very challenging. It can lead some to doubt of the bounty of God for them. There is also the idea that where suffering increases, there God's bounty abounds. The last idea is related to the affirmation of the generosity of God who takes care of human needs.

This text helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus introduces himself to the Jews as the bread of life. First of all, the Gospel shows the enthusiastic people looking for Jesus wherever they could find him until the town of Capernaum.

It shows also the reaction of Jesus who denounces their search as not pure, but rather motivated by human and material needs. Then, the Gospel speaks of the invitation of Jesus to the crowd so that they work for the eternal food that comes from his hands.

After that, the Gospel recalls the intriguing question of the crowd to Jesus about what they have to do in order to accomplish the work of God. It also highlights the answer of Jesus and the immediate reaction of the crowd to it. The Gospel ends with Jesus' statement about himself as the bread of life that came down from heaven and how whoever comes to him and believes in him will never hunger or thirst.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the prevalence of spiritual food over material food. What do I mean by that? Let me explain. Each day we wake up with just one preoccupation in mind, namely to work hard in order to earn our life and that of our beloved ones. Sometimes, we cannot even sleep well because we have worries and concerns for our families, our children and our future.

When we find ourselves in such a situation, we can only work harder so that our beloved ones may find something to eat, to wear and to satisfy their human needs. Anything we do this way is legitimate, worthwhile and approved by God. The simple fact that Jesus had pity on people to the point of feeding them, as we heard in the last Sunday Gospel, is already a sign that God approves whatever we do in order to provide for our needs.

However, one thing is to care for our legitimate human needs and another is to think that the goal of our life on earth is just that. We have to understand that, as legitimate as they might be, our material needs should not be the only reason why we live.

It is for that reason that Jesus tells the crowd of those who were looking for him that they should not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which comes from him.

By saying so, Jesus is not despising material food or anything related to it that people would do in this world. What he wants is to set and affirm the prevalence of spiritual food over material food? But, why? What is wrong that people care for the satisfaction of their material needs? In truth, there is nothing wrong with the care for material food, otherwise Jesus would not have fed five thousand people with a few loaves and fish.

In fact, what Jesus wants is that we set some priorities in what we do in this world. Of course, we have to care for our stomach, but we should not, however, forget our soul. We should not work in this world as though the only thing that counts most is the satisfaction of our human material needs. We have to work also for God and for our spiritual life.

After all, life is more than the satisfaction of the material bread. A life well lived is that which transcends the limits of the earthly things and leads us to God. Moreover, Jesus wants that those who follow him appreciate the things of this world in the limit of their use as a means put at their disposal by God in order to sustain them in life until the day they will share in the eternal banquet of heaven.

For that reason, we have to understand that there are two kinds of hunger: the physical hunger that material food can satisfy and the spiritual hunger that food cannot satisfy. Therefore, to live in the world with open eyes and open minds by recognizing the part we owe to God is a sign of wisdom.

In that sense, it becomes clear why Jesus introduces himself as the bread of life that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. In the same way, we understand that the bread and fish he multiplied and with which he fed the hungry people point to the power he has received from his Father to give life to anyone who comes to him.

It is that giving-life power of Jesus that we celebrate in the sacrament of the Eucharist anytime we say the Mass. The Eucharist, indeed, is the sacrament of the presence of Jesus par excellence. Through it, Jesus comes to us, in the species of bread and wine, in order to give us life.

In order to fully understand the mystery of the Eucharist, we do not need human senses, but rather faith. Only in faith can we approach the Eucharist. Without faith 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 ask the Lord the grace to receive him worthily today in the 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 05, 2018
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20180805homily.pdf