

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?"

John 6, 1-15



The account of the feeding of the large crowd is the only miracle story that is recorded in all four Gospels. In his Gospel, Mark gives us two versions. It is a story that was particularly significant to the Gospel writers and their communities because of its relevance to the Eucharist. In fact, in Mark's version, Jesus uses the Greek word *eucharisteo* (to give thanks) as he prays in gratitude over the young boy's gift of five barley loaves and two fish. John's account attributes to Jesus the very same actions: "Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and gave them out to all who were sitting ready; he then did the same with the fish, giving out as much as was wanted." These verbs of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing are still repeated in every celebration of the Eucharist. But more of that over the next few Sunday reflections.

Today's gospel-reading closely parallels the first reading from the Book of Kings. To underline that point, I think it is worth repeating today's first reading in its entirety:

One day a man arrived from Baal-shalishah. He brought the man of God twenty loaves of fresh-baked barley bread from the early harvest. Elisha said: "Pass it around to the people to eat." But his servant replied: "For a hundred men? There's not nearly enough!" Elisha said: "Just go ahead and do it, for God says: 'There's plenty. They will eat and have some left over.'" The servant passed around what he had. The people not only ate, but they had leftovers. (2Kings 4, 42-44)

In today's gospel-reading, John alludes to the close knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus had. John observes that, in questioning Philip about how they could possibly feed the huge crowd in front of them, Jesus intended "only to test Philip's faith; for Jesus himself knew exactly what he was going to do" (John 6, 6-7). Jesus knew the story of Elisha, and realised, in his heart, that, in this time and place, he was being asked to be the instrument of God's desire to be the provider of plenty for people in need.

It is important to note that neither Elisha nor Jesus would have been able to feed the crowds around them without the generosity of two unnamed, ordinary people who gave what they had - a farmer and a small boy.

In all this, there is surely a message for us. As I look over my life, I can own that there have been fits and starts about my attempts to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. But in today's second reading from Ephesians, we hear Paul's shake-up message from his prison cell to the Christian Community in Ephesus, and to all of us, too: "I want you to get out there and walk - better yet, run - on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands...And mark that you do this with humility and discipline - not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert to noticing differences and quick at mending fences...Everything you are and think and do is to be by the one God who is alive and active within you" (Ephesians 4, 1-6).

Implicit in today's gospel-reading are questions for all of us who claim to belong to the very extensive community of Christians: Do we believe that God will provide us with what we need to carry out the mission in which God wants us to be involved? Many of us are good at making suggestions and skilled at planning. We make lists of what we want in order to reach out compassionately to the poor, the needy, the lonely and the homeless. But what attitudes underpin our way of reaching out and our management of the resources we have to share? Does our way of

engaging send a message of hope and generosity or do those to whom we reach out see us as people who give grudgingly of our time and resources? In today's readings from Kings and John, Elisha and Jesus reveal a God of abundance and generosity.

John makes the point that both Philip and Andrew have a measured approach to life. In responding to Jesus, Philip says: "Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them (the crowd) a small piece each". Commenting on the young lad's offering of five loaves and two fish, Andrew says: "But what is that between so many?" Yet, woven throughout John's Gospel is the message that God's abundant generosity can be clearly seen in the life and actions of Jesus: In his conversation with the woman at the well in Sychar, Jesus says: "The water I will give (grace, hope, life) will be a spring within, gushing up fountains of endless life" (John 4, 14). At the wedding in Cana, Jesus directed the servants to fill to the brim six large water pots (each with a capacity of 20-30 gallons). The result was an abundant supply of high-quality wine. (John 2, 6-7) In the opening chapter of his Gospel, John describes Jesus as generous to the core: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1, 16). In his final exhortation to the apostles, Jesus assures them about the future: "There are many rooms in my Father's house; if there were not, I would have told you" (John 14, 2). John concludes his Gospel with the note that he has written only a brief account of Jesus' life and good works: "There are so many other things that Jesus did. If they were all written down, I can't imagine a world big enough to hold such a library of books" (John 21, 25). In John's mind, there is no doubt that Jesus was the personification of God's abundant love and generosity.

Sadly, so many of us in our early years were taught that God would punish our sins severely, that hell awaited us if we persisted in our wickedness. That kind of religion taught us that God's favour was somehow to be earned by personal effort. Yet, today's readings assure us that God loves us freely, abundantly, endlessly; dreams that we might relinquish a faith that is measured and calculated, and grow to reflect some of God's abundant goodness to others.

I conclude with a poem that has been attributed to an Anglican pastor and poet, John Adam (1936-20), who lived and worked for many years in Ireland, absorbing something of the Celtic approach to poetry. Our world would be different if we could see the sacred in all the ordinary things we have and use, and in everyone we meet.

*Be gentle...when you touch bread.
Let it not lie...uncared for, unwanted.
So often...bread is taken for granted.
There is such beauty in bread;
beauty of sun and soil, beauty of patient toil.
Wind and sun have caressed it. Christ often blessed it.
Be gentle...when you touch bread.*

David Adam