

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 25-26, 2009
St. John the Evangelist Parish
Deacon James J. Benjamin

2 Kings 4: 42-44 Psalm 145 Ephesians 4: 1-6 John 6: 1-15

The story of Jesus feeding the 5000
with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish
is reported in all four Gospels.
In John's Gospel it is one of only seven signs,
or miracles, that John presents.
Clearly the evangelists thought that this miracle
could not be omitted,
wherever and whenever the story of Jesus was told.

Why was it considered so important,
and what is its significance for us?

It is not because it is the only example of a miraculous meal
in Sacred Scripture.

For example, in the first reading,
we hear an ancient story about Elisha, the Man of God,
who trusts God's promise in providing sufficient food
that "they shall eat and there shall be some left over."
And, indeed, 20 loaves, the first of that harvest that year,
are more than enough for 100 men.
Women and children were not considered important enough to mention,
given the gender bias of the day,
but probably they also ate their fill.

We receive a clear message that God keeps his promises
that all will be fed, and fed generously,
with lots of leftovers when the meal is done.
And so, from ancient times until this day people gather,
as we have, expecting and needing to be fed by God.

You and I want to be nourished by the Word of God,
the Word of Scripture that teaches us about salvation history
and keeps reminding us of the Good News that Jesus brings.
The Word which assures each of us that God loves us dearly
and keeps us close to his heart.

We come to be fed at the altar
and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus.
This food unites us with each other and with him.

The Eucharist, little by little, transforms us spiritually
and causes us to become more and more like Christ himself.
It is truly the bread of life, of life eternal.

But let's not forget about our need to be fed regular, ordinary food.
If you think about a time when you were really, really hungry,
you might be able to relate to how these people felt,
having spent the day on the mountainside.
For me, being hungry with no prospect of eating soon,
makes me irritable and distracted.
Knowing people as well as he did,
Jesus surely understood that before he could satisfy the people's need
for their spirits to be enlightened and to be healed,
he had to satisfy their hunger for food.
We can also imagine how good they felt
when those loaves of bread and pieces of dried fish began to appear,
and their hunger began to disappear.
This fare was certainly not elegant, since barley was inexpensive
and often all that poor people could afford,
but it was plentiful, and that was all that mattered.

In a different way from the first reading,
John also reminds us of our linkage to Israel's past.
Jesus goes "up the mountain" with his disciples,
perhaps to make us think of Moses going up Mt. Sinai
to receive the 10 Commandments from God himself.
The people come up the mountain too,
and it's on the mountain where we encounter God.
It is no accident that the people come to realize after they have been fed
that Jesus truly is the Prophet, the one, like Moses, sent by God to his Chosen People.

Then John situates this one of Jesus' signs in the spring,
at the time of Passover.
People would make the connection between the feeding of the 5000
and the feeding of the Jews with manna,
after Moses had freed them from the Egyptians.
The manna was a food that would spoil if the people tried to hoard it,
but John is comparing it to the food that Jesus would provide
that would last forever.

The food that Jesus provides comes to us without any cost.
It's a sort of irony that Philip tells Jesus
that they have no money to pay for food for the huge crowd,
food that, like the manna, will soon spoil,
when the food of everlasting life that we receive,
that is far more precious than the bread we consume at our regular meals,

doesn't cost us a dime.

This event connects us also to our future as a eucharistic people.
We have blessings and joy ahead of us that are beyond our imagining.
Like the bread that was more than enough for the 5000,
life with God that is our promise will bring us grace and happiness
poured into our laps and spilling over, to use a scriptural image.

In the Gospel today John does not tell us this,
but we can imagine that the apostles went into the crowd,
in an attempt to find out if any people brought food that they might share with others.
Only Andrew was successful in locating a boy
who was generous and trusting enough to hand over the five small loaves
and two fish that he had had enough foresight to bring with him.
He must have wondered if he would get anything to eat that day,
and maybe he even wished that he had stayed home,
but in the end he handed over what he had to Andrew.

That's enough for Jesus.
He takes what the boy offered and it becomes more than enough for all.
That is a good lesson for you and me.
How often have we thought that we had nothing to offer,
or that we were only one person and didn't make any difference?
This story of the one boy and his meager supply of food
that became enough to feed everyone,
should help us get beyond our fear and lack of confidence that our gift is worth anything.

In a few minutes Msgr. Woy will do, once again,
what priests have been doing since the day when Jesus,
on that mountainside,
took the bread, gave thanks to God who provided it,
and distributed it to everyone who was present.

We receive this Eucharist and we become,
more and more, the Body of Christ.
Jesus takes this unpromising material that we all are
and turns it into food for the world.

We receive Eucharist; we become Eucharist.
And then we give of ourselves
to everyone who needs us.
That, in a nutshell, is what our baptism calls us to.
I wonder what our world would look like
if each of us, like that little boy,
were willing to offer whatever we had for the sake of all.
Can you imagine?
It would be a world where everyone would have all their needs met.

Not only would hunger be a thing of the past,
but each one of us would be fully satisfied,
totally comfortable, at peace and taken care of.

You and I are that food for the world
and it is what our mission is all about.
Certainly it is a mission we have to grow into,
just as Jesus himself had to grow into his,
learning what it was that he had been called to accomplish.

It is why we come here, week after week,
to hear the Word of God, to take it in like the food it is for our souls,
to consume the Eucharist,
to allow it to become a part of us
and to strengthen us for our part in this mission.

And one day, God willing,
there will be enough peace, enough justice, enough kindness,
enough mercy and enough food for all.
Through us and through all believers
the mission of Jesus will finally have been accomplished.
Let us pray that each of us will come to play his or her proper role in this great work.