

The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time --- July 24-24, 2021

In our short summer season, the departments of transportation try to take care of a lot of road and bridge repairs so in traveling this time of the year we usually find ourselves running into a lot of road detours.

Likewise in our Sunday readings. Our gospel readings are mainly from the Gospel of Mark this year, but beginning this Sunday we take a five-week detour into chapter 6 of the Gospel of John to walk through Jesus' teaching on the meaning of the Eucharist. We do this every third year and it is like a mini-retreat within the liturgy as we switch from Mark's account of this miracle to John's much longer version in which we let Jesus in this Gospel teach us about the deeper reality of the miracle of the loaves and fishes and of the Eucharist.

This chapter six of the Gospel of John begins with an account of Jesus' miraculous feeding of large crowd of 5,000 with just five barley loaves and two fish.

This miracle is the only miracle that is found in all four gospels. No other miracle is so well attested to and confirmed other than the resurrection of Jesus.

In today's first reading we hear about Elisha's miraculous feeding over a hundred people with just twenty small barley loaves that a man has brought to him. It is something truly miraculous and memorable that Jesus was able to feed 5,000 persons with just these few loaves and fish and end up with 12 wicker baskets of bread left over after they had eaten as much as they wanted.

So what is the meaning of this miracle or sign? And, why do all 4 gospels include it?

One of the first things we should note is that St. John does not speak of this event as a miracle but as one of Jesus' signs which point to a deeper reality. Jesus is quite clear that this miracle is much more than just a physical action of feeding this large crowd, but how well do we or this crowd recognize this?

In today's gospel we heard that "When the people saw the sign that Jesus had done, they said, "this is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." Since

Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.”

In a reflection on today’s gospel, it was noted that one of the hallmarks of our time is its lopsided imbalance regarding what is of importance physically and spiritually in our life.

We take great care of our physical well-being – matters like our health, our finances, and our living arrangements. At the same time, we take very little care of our souls and inner life. – It is true that we are both physical and spiritual creatures, and we need to take thought for both aspects of our nature. But God in Christ teaches us a clear priority in these matters. Our physical existence and care ought not to be neglected, but its importance is small in comparison with the interior life of our souls.

For example: Jesus tells his disciples, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”* St. Paul says that, *“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do so to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.”* And in battling the devil’s temptations, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy: *“Man does not live on bread alone, but by every work that comes from the mouth of God.”*

This principle of the primacy of the spiritual comes into play in today’s gospel where Jesus performs an outstanding miracle multiplying the bread and fish from almost nothing to great abundance. But his purpose is not simply to provide a meal. In fact, he does not mention that they were hungry. He is pointing to a much more important truth. As he will say shortly after giving this miraculous sign: “I am the bread of life. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”

It is evident that those who witnessed this miracle did not understand it. They were viewing it only in its human and physical aspect. They were so impressed that they tried to carry Jesus off and crown him king, yet Jesus slips away

from them. Jesus is truly the king of the universe. Weren't they responding rightly to what Jesus had done? The answer is no. They failed to understand that his provision for their physical hungers was only a sign of a much more important nourishment: the food of the very being of God. They saw in physical and human terms what Jesus meant to be understood spiritually. ---- Jesus corrected this error when they found him again. He said to them: "You seek me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you."

This Gospel message is an important lesson and remedy for the blindness of our age. We go to great lengths to purify our food of everything that might hurt us (we did this as much as possible at the food booth at the fair), we get nervous about every possible side effect of medicines and vaccines; we insist on careful routines of physical exercise; we consider financial wealth to be the supreme sign of success.

Meanwhile we allow toxic garbage of every kind to enter our minds and spirits through bad or immoral programs in the movies, television, music and other media. We surround ourselves with constant and huge amounts of silly distractions and moral poisons with hardly a care, but invest little time or energy in working for the food that endures to eternal life.

As we make this detour over the next 4 weeks into the Gospel of John and Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist, let us open ourselves to see and understand that to receive Christ's body and blood --- to be given the gift of the Bread of Life -- is far more important, worth more sacrifice and energy, than anything touching us merely in a physical and temporal way.

It is the gift of understanding this that leads young people, like Joshua whom we will hear from today, to look into the possibility that God is calling them to a lifelong vocation of service to the Church.

"If anyone eats of this Bread he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."