

**Shepherd-King**  
**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**  
**(Jn 6:1-15)**

The miracle of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fish is the zenith of Jesus' public ministry. It is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. It is also unique in that it is a miracle on a grand scale, national in magnitude. This is an extremely large crowd, and it represents the gathered twelve tribes of Israel. In this miracle, Jesus is presented as the Shepherd-King of Israel, the Prophet, and the Messiah.

Jesus imitates David, who as king of the newly consolidated kingdom of Israel "*distributed among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a loaf of bread...*" (2 Sm 6:19).

Jesus repeats the miracle of Elisha, who multiplied the barley loaves in order that the people may eat, with some left over (2K 4:43-44). Elisha was successor to Elijah, and outperformed him in miracles. As Elisha is to Elijah, so Jesus is to John the Baptist. Jesus performs this miracle at the moment he received news of the death of the Baptist (Mk 6:14-16).

In this miracle Jesus becomes the Good Shepherd prophesied by Psalm 23: "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; in verdant pastures he gives me repose.*" Upon disembarking the boat and seeing the crowds, Mark comments how Jesus had compassion on them, for they were like "*sheep without a shepherd*" (Mk 6:34). Both Mark (Mk 6:39) and John (Jn 6:10) note the large area of green grass where the people are organized and fed with this miraculous food.

This miracle takes place just as the twelve apostles return from their first missionary journey (cf. Mk 6:7, 30), in which they were sent specifically to the lost tribes of Israel and not the Gentiles (cf. Mt 10:5). Jesus is headquartered in the region of the old kingdom where the northern tribes had been lost and scattered. Their mission was so successful it generated incredible enthusiasm about the Messiah, such that Israelites from the entire region flocked to Jesus at the village of Capernaum, precipitating his attempt to escape with the apostles to a deserted place across the lake for some rest.

Though much is unclear about biblical numerology, the number "5" is associated with King David as leader of Israel. It is five loaves that are multiplied, and the crowd is five thousand men. Later, Jesus will perform another miracle of multiplication, using seven loaves for a crowd of four thousand. That miracle pertains to the gentiles (the number "4" is associated with the "ends of the earth"), but this one is for Israel.

Thus it is that the miracle of Multiplication represents the apex of Jesus' achievement in re-establishing the tribes of Israel under their Shepherd-King. The people recognize this, and try to make him king right away (Jn 6:15).

Yet Jesus does not permit it, and escapes into the hills by himself while the apostles sail back to Capernaum overnight in their boats. The next day, when Jesus is also back in Capernaum, he speaks to a large crowd crammed into the synagogue about the true meaning of the miracle, and his true role as Shepherd-King-Messiah. He so shocks and scandalizes them by what he says that the crowds end up abandoning him. At the height of his power and acclaim, Jesus ruins everything.

Jesus is not a political Messiah, nor is his purpose to put bread on the table. The purpose of his miracle is to introduce the Eucharist, a much richer nourishment: "*Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life*" (Jn 6:27). For the next five Sundays, the Gospel will follow the "Bread of Life" discourse in John's Gospel.

The bread that Jesus will give in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, instituted at the Last Supper by his death and Resurrection, is his own Flesh and Blood, imbued with eternal life. "*I am the living bread come down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die*" (Jn 6:50).

By means of this public and visible miracle, which everyone can see and experience, Jesus gives a sign of the Eucharist, a miracle which cannot be seen outwardly. Just as the young boy brought forward his small offering, an insignificant offering is also brought forward during the Mass. Just as Jesus takes that gift and offers a prayer of thanksgiving over it, so the priest *in persona Christi* offers the Eucharistic prayer. And just as Jesus distributes the bread to the crowd through the apostles, so the Church distributes the Eucharist to the worldwide crowd every Sunday during Holy Communion, gathering up the left over to store in the tabernacle afterward. And just as the bread and fish were superabundant, so the Eucharist is infinite in its power to nourish the soul, save, and inoculate against death, since it is the gift of God Himself in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Let us learn from this miracle the truth of the Eucharist which we cannot see, and each Sunday seek to rest with the Lord in the verdant pastures of the Church where we are nourished by Bread that satisfies.