

Ordinary Time 17

Like last Sunday's Gospel, today we see Jesus trying to get some time alone but instead is faced with the needs of a large crowd of people. Today's Gospel reading is a familiar and beloved story: the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. In this account from John – which appears in a similar form in all four Gospels – we are reassured of God's super-abundant provision, his ability to multiply every purely natural, human effort and offering, raising it to a higher power, beyond our comprehension.

The timing of this miracle is just prior to the feast of Passover, a ritual meal celebrated each year to re-enact the saving of God's people from the slavery in Egypt. The centerpiece of this meal is the offering up of a year-old male ram, "without stain or blemish". This is the spiritual timing and significance of what Jesus is about to do. This meal in the wilderness relates to Passover, and Passover itself relates to the Sacrifice that Jesus would establish at the Last Supper, offering Himself to God for our sake.

Perhaps 5000 men, plus women and children, are crowding around Jesus and the disciples. They are getting hungry. It isn't hard to understand the concern of the disciples. Jesus deliberately engages with their situation, not backing away or distancing Himself from them. In this we can infer that God is involved in our daily struggles and concrete life situations. He seems to test Philip with a hypothetical question, "Where can we buy enough food...?". Philip admits that the problem is beyond their capacity. But, Andrew, who often serves as a kind of go-between, has been approached by a boy who offers them five barley loaves and two dried fish. Action not words! Andrew's reaction is that, though obviously well-intended, the boy's offering is completely inadequate.

Jesus doesn't respond to Andrew's skepticism, He too responds with action. [The boy models the directness of what Jesus often calls "childlike" faith.] He has the people lie down on the abundant grass, taking the posture that the disciples would at the Last Supper. He offers the bread to God, gives thanks (the word for give thanks is "eucharist"). Jesus distributes the fragments. Clearly, we have here a prototype, a foreshadowing of the Mass and our Lord's feeding us of His own Body and Blood. How it is that all these people experienced being filled? Was it

only that the amount of food was multiplied, or was there also something about the “potency” of the food?

The end of this story is very mysterious. The fragments remaining were not insignificant – twelve baskets full. Here we seem to find Jesus commissioning the Twelve apostles, pointing out to them their future as they would one day lead various local churches and face serious challenges and needs, both spiritual and physical. Each of them would need to learn the lesson that Philip and Andrew were being shown. The act of entrusting our needs to God, entrusting our own efforts, however pitiful they may seem to us, seemingly unequal to the need.

Maybe the Twelve were able to take away an important faith lesson for the future, but what about the crowd who had been fed? They do not seem yet able to understand the deeper significance of what Jesus has done and who He is. But they are prepared to see him as the Prophet, the prophet foreseen by Moses. They apparently harbor thoughts of earthly kingship as the salvation that they need rather than a savior who can save them from sin and death. Jesus withdraws at this, finally getting some solitude to pray.

God concerns Himself with our problems. He shows us a way of faith in which we can transcend even death. What He asks from us is the faith of the boy who offered what He had, rather than withhold it for himself. Our self-offering follows the pattern He set in His own. Are there things we withhold from offering to God? What might those be? Time? Trust? Humility? Obedience? Money? What am I willing to lay on the line? The lesson here is that what we give to God, no matter how small it may seem, He can multiply its effect in ways that may astound us. Are we willing?