

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I 2 Kgs 4:42-44

READING II Eph 4:1-6

GOSPEL Jn 6:1-15

Elisha is the successor of Elijah during the trying days of the ninth century B.C. Unlike Elijah, who was a solitary figure, Elisha is the dynamic leader of a prophetic guild. Unlike Elijah's story, which is composed of a basic cycle of stories, Elisha's story consists of a variety of incidents: Many of which are miracle stories. Elisha's disciples recount such stories to confirm his importance, and to demonstrate his concern for the prophetic guild. The miracle of the twenty barley loaves is one such story. "First fruits", referring to the grain from a recent harvest. The popular oral literature proved Elisha's devotion to his group by a prediction-fulfillment story. "Thus says the Lord" is followed by "as the Lord had said." The feeding of one hundred men from twenty barley loaves is what one would expect of a great man of God.

Christians must reflect the unity of the Church in daily life. The author of Ephesians exhorts his audience to conform their lives to the reality of the Church's nature. Therefore, they are to put up with one another through loving service, patience, and meekness. Above all, they must preserve unity. A unity which is bound up with the very source of Christian life, the Spirit. The author follows the lead of Dt 6:4, which emphasizes unity in God. Consequently, he singles out seven elements in the nature of the Church which best captures this unity: One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Conduct which reflects this sevenfold formula demonstrates the unity of the Christian community.

While the Synoptics and John reflect the Eucharistic symbolism in the story of the multiplication of the loaves ("take, bless/thank, break, give" — "break" is missing in John), it is John alone who exploits this scene for its special "sign" potential. In John, where signs are perceived only as miracles, they do not lead to faith. To lead to faith, the sign must provoke God's presence as revealed in Jesus.

The scene is tied up with Moses. Just as Moses goes up the mountain (Sinai), Jesus goes up a mountain. Philip's question echoes Moses' question to God about providing food (Nm 11:13). Philip's answer also echoes Moses' question ("Can enough sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them?"— Nm 11:22). Similarly, the prophet coming into the world was a new Moses who would establish a new Israel. The miracle makes the audience conclude that Jesus is such a figure. At this point, John adds a historical note which is wanting in the Synoptic Gospels. Namely, they attempt to make Jesus their king because of the

miracle. For John, the sign does not lead the people to recognize the true nature of Jesus. It is "just" a miracle.

To be a sign or not to be a sign — that is the question. We doubt at times that we are important to the Church and therefore doubt we should advertise the Church. We question at times whether we can make a difference and whether we should bother to share our faith. We wonder at times whether we are really members of our Church and whether we should make the effort to announce our membership. In such instances we fail to see that we are to reveal Christ and Christ's community to others. To be a sign or not to be a sign —that is the question.

The author of Ephesians believes that Christians can, and do, make a difference. They are asked to reflect the unity in God. To live a life worthy of their calling implies their sign value. Thus, a sustaining love of neighbor which is grounded in the Spirit reflects the presence of God. Christians are to be the sacraments of God's presence. Therefore, to be a sign or not to be a sign—that is the question.

The author of John presents Jesus as one who works "signs," i.e., miracles which should lead one to acknowledge God's presence in Jesus. However, for John, Jesus is also the sign of the Father's love and concern. The task of Jesus is to reflect the mystery of the Father and to make humans aware of his person. By multiplying the loaves and fishes, Jesus attests to his Father's presence, although the people remain merely on the level of miracle. For John, Jesus' whole existence is to be a sign. In John, to be a sign or not to be a sign—that is the question.

Husbands and wives who develop mutual love over the years choose to be signs of God's love over the centuries. Those who generously provide for the needs of the lonely and distraught elect to be signs of God's loving concern for all. Workers, both married and single, who opt to meet their obligations choose to be signs of God's justice. Charitable people who regularly look to the needs of family and friends elect to be signs of God's loving providence. Such people maintain that they are important and that they do make a difference. For them, to be a sign or not to be a sign—that is the question.

Eucharist presents bread and wine as the sign of God's nourishing presence. Eucharist challenges the believing community to translate the sign value of the gifts into their world of concern. Eucharist insists that to eat and drink with Christ means to continue to reflect Christ's presence. In Eucharist, too, to be a sign or not to be a sign—that is the question.