

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

July 25, 2021

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Brothers and Sisters,

This Sunday we have begun the reading of chapter 6 of John's Gospel, which will culminate on the Twenty-first Sunday, August 22. The Church invites us to meditate attentively on this chapter because it touches on one of the most profound problems affecting humanity of all times: how to ensure that all the inhabitants of the world have their necessary food and not die of hunger. We all know almost by heart the scene of the multiplication of the loaves and fish that Jesus did to feed more than five thousand people.

But before going deeper into the scene of the Gospel, let us clarify the message of the First Reading which presents a similar event to the one in John's Gospel. We'll also touch on the Second Reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. I believe that the message of today's Word of God will help us to better understand the mechanisms that dominate the world, including the Olympic Games that began on Friday in the midst of the growing contagion of the new coronavirus in Tokyo.

First Reading (2 Kings 4:42-44): the prophet Elisha multiplies loaves of bread for a hundred people

Chapter 4 of the Second Book of Kings speaks of the miracles of the prophet Elisha, successor of Elijah. Elisha's prophetic activity took place in the Northern Kingdom. He is a miracle-working prophet. Through his miracles he tried to lead the people of God.

In the brief passage that the Church has chosen for today's liturgy, we are told that a man brings Elisha 20 loaves of bread and grain in a bag. Elisha orders his servant to distribute them to the one hundred hungry people. The servant replies that it is impossible because the loaves can feed only a handful of them will run out soon. But when he began to distribute them according to the prophet's order, miraculously everyone ate their fill and there were still leftovers.

This miracle of the multiplication of the loaves that the prophet Elisha did reminds us of the fact that Jesus fed more than five thousand people. But the real message will not be in the miraculous fact of the multiplication of the loaves, but of those who shared what they had to eat for others. That is the way to solve the problem of hunger and so many other needs suffered by the poor.

Second Reading (Ephesians 4:1-6) : may there be unity in the community

The community of the Ephesians seems to have difficulty among themselves, because Paul pleads from prison that they strive to maintain unity, arguing that they are all baptized and therefore are all children of God and brothers and sisters. Despite cultural, economic and other differences, if we recognize God as our Father, we are all brothers and sisters in his Son Jesus.

Once they become disciples of Jesus, they must conduct themselves in a blameless way, especially with mutual respect for their differences and forgiveness for one another. Paul insists on how they must restore the unity because it is a sign of the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit among them. Without the mutual communion, they will not be able to give testimony of being a Christian community, and it will even be an embarrassment to non-Christians.

To achieve this unity as Jesus desires, Paul exhorts them to cultivate the following attitudes: to have more esteem for others than for themselves; to appreciate the gifts that God has given to others; and to be of one heart and mind. All of these presuppose a detachment from all forms of ambition. Humility and modesty play a great role where there is a threat to unity. Gentleness, Meekness, and clemency are behaviors with the neighbors that keep away all kinds of quarrels and avoid the feeling of superiority over others. Above all, patience is an essential trait of love that makes possible and safeguards the unity of peace in the community. And Paul concludes: where there is unity, there is God. And that's the community qualified to be called truly Christian, and it cannot be called as such without unity.

Gospel (John 6:1-15): Jesus feeds five thousand with five loaves and two fish

And now we can better savor the message of the Gospel. Let's take a closer look.

Many people had heard about Jesus and came to him from far away to be cured of their

illness. Surely everyone must have brought something to eat, something like a simple packed lunch (obento) or a few rice balls (onigiri) the Japanese would have brought. It is interesting that Jesus took the initiative to feed all those who came instead of letting his disciples handle. Jesus begins by asking Philip where they could buy bread to feed the crowd. Philip tells him that two hundred denarii would not be enough. Andrew, for his part, tells Jesus that he has found a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish but they are too little to feed the hungry multitude who are with them for many hours. Let us remember that a similar question had been asked by the servant of the prophet Elisha.

Jesus' message to his disciples and to us

I believe that all of you, like me, are familiar with this scene: Jesus with those few loaves of bread worked the miracle of feeding more than five thousand men. But we often forget that the key to the message is in the attitude of that young boy who shared what he had no matter how little it might be. The boy also knew that what he shared was not enough for no more than three, but he was sure that in Jesus' hands it could produce the miracle of multiplication. His surprise must have been great when saw 12 baskets of leftover after everyone had eaten and been satisfied.

It is very beautiful what John the evangelist emphasizes in this chapter 6. In the world there will always be hungry people, and faced with this problem, his Master Jesus taught him that no matter how much money there is, it will not be enough to feed everyone who is hungry. The problem of hunger is not solved by buying food, and it will only be solved by sharing whatever we have. This sharing among us is the true miracle, the greatest sign of God's work.

Let us keep this message in mind whenever we read this event of the multiplication of the loaves. May we today, in the midst of the pandemic crisis that continues, not forget the need for the mutual help and solidarity with many people, especially with those who are in need of food, clothing, education, health, and housing, etc. As the first Christians did, let us not be afraid to share freely, especially to those who are in need, remembering that the act of sharing bread continues and preserves the life and work of the risen Jesus in humanity.

Let us be collaborators of Jesus just like that boy. None of us are gods, but we can be servants of the kingdom of God. With this generosity we will experience the joy of living the Gospel as Pope Francis always tells us in his messages.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE).