

18th Sunday of the Ordinary Year

In the first reading of today, we see a very moving entreaty of God through the prophet Isaiah pleading with his people to return to him. It is the voice of a loving Father or Mother who is worried about a child in danger of dying of hunger for refusing to take food. God who made us knows that our spirit, just as our body, must be fed. Though, a person might have more food and drink than he needs, and yet feels far from satisfied, and why is that? During the first years of exile, the people of Israel had experienced material want, but gradually their material needs were more or less satisfied. On the other hand, their spiritual famine grew worse with the years, and why was that? It was because many of them abandoned their religion and lived as pagans. God uses the metaphor of food and drink in a banquet to illustrate this everlasting, loving and glorious covenantal relationship he has been calling all people to from time immemorial. This call is because he created us and equipped us for it, bodily and spiritually. This is why the human heart longs for true happiness and peace, and no amount of material things can quench its thirst these ends. Family, possessions, human love, can satisfy our heart's longing for happiness but only to a point. The only one who can fully satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst is God. This why St. August said, "You have made us for you, O Lord, and our heart cannot be satisfied till it finds rest in you."

Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills God's age-long invitation to this eternal banquet. According to St. John's narratives of the miracle of the Loaves and the fish, because all the four evangelists gave their own versions of the same miracle, he said that Jesus worked that miracle not only to feed the people but also to help both, apostles and the people, to understand the lesson, "that Jesus himself is to be our food in three ways: through faith in him, through his teaching i.e. his word, and through the Eucharist. In the Gospel of today we noticed how he made himself available as food using the allegory of the multiplication of loaves and the fish. Here, he demonstrates his compassion and generosity which are integral aspects of this meal. Jesus is both the gift and the giver.

Giving is at the heart of the Gospel. There are two kinds of giving. One is when the giver gives what he or she can live without. This kind of giving does not really hurt. But there is another kind of giving that does hurt, namely, when the gift is as desperately needed by the giver as by the receiver. Here, a real sacrifice is involved. This is where compassion and generosity are essential properties to true giving. To appreciate this we need to consider the circumstances of the miracle. Jesus has just learned that his cousin John had been murdered. Naturally, he needed peace and quiet. But when he stepped out of the boat he found a throng of people waiting for him. He might have got angry and sent them away. Instead, he had compassion on them and gave himself completely to them. The crowd ate as much as they could from that miracle of the loaves and the fish. The early Christians saw in that feeding of the crowd a foreshadowing of the Eucharist.

We too are nourished at the table of the Eucharist starting with faith, then his words and then the Eucharist. Only at God's table can we get the nourishment our hearts are longing for. In the Eucharist we taste the love and friendship of God in a unique way. The proof that we have experienced that love and friendship will be our willingness to share it with others in here and out there. It is not so much about giving things. It is more about giving of ourselves, of our time, and of our gifts.