

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 55:1-3 / Matthew 14:13-21)
03.08.2014

Mercy

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Those who ate numbered about five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children”. We are so used to hearing that last verse of today’s gospel passage that we don’t really pay attention to it.

You remember the context: “Jesus withdrew by boat to a lonely place, where he and his disciples could be by themselves. But ‘the people’ heard of this and, leaving the towns, went after Him on foot”. ‘The people’ were about five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children.

And all that, dear brothers and sisters, without twitter accounts, face books or email to announce the event; all that without radio, TV or newspaper advertisements; without telephones or fax machines; without cars, busses or planes!

About five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children! Ouaoh!

If we read that verse attentively, we cannot but ask ourselves: who is this Jesus who is able to attract thousands of people like that, without any lead-up publicity? There is a power of attraction in Him. What is it that attracts the crowds? Why do people run after Him?

An answer to these questions is given to us in today’s gospel passage. There, we read: “As Jesus stepped ashore, he saw a large crowd; and **he took pity on them and healed the sick**”.

Jesus’ power of attraction is **his mercy**. If the crowds run after Jesus, it is because they have found in him someone who is merciful. Mercy is what they need, what they long for. Mercy is what we need and long for.

Jesus came into the world to reveal God’s mercy for his people. Jesus fulfils his mission by being merciful.

Jesus is merciful when he gives plenty of his time to those in need who come to Him, even if he had planned to do something very important at that very moment. In fact, in the situation where we meet Him today, he had decided to go apart with his disciples to grieve the death of John the Baptist.

Jesus is merciful when he fulfils the spiritual hunger of those who come to Him by speaking to them at some length.

Jesus is merciful when he does not forget the physical hunger of those who listen to Him, because He is concerned by their whole person: soul and body.

The quantity of fish and bread left-over at the end of this miraculous banquet in the desert is also a sign of the Lord’s divine mercy and generosity.

Jesus is merciful when he cures all those who are physically, spiritually or morally ill and who come to him with trust, longing for healing.

We too have to be merciful with one another as our heavenly Father is merciful with us.

In fact, today’s gospel passage does not mention that Jesus spoke to the people. The text says only that Jesus took pity on the people and healed the sick. But in the parallel passages of the

same event, it is clearly mentioned that Jesus spoke to the people at some length. What did he say to them? We are not told. Probably we can imagine that Jesus spoke to them about the coming of the kingdom of God. But can we know a little more?

There is a clue in the parable which can help us to guess what Jesus told the crowds. The clue is that there are similarities between this parable of the multiplication of the loaves and the narrative of the institution of the Eucharist.

In our parable, we read that **Jesus took the five loaves**, raised his eyes to heaven and **said the blessing**. And **breaking the loaves, he handed them to his disciples** who gave them to the crowds”.

In the narrative of the Institution of the Eucharist in the same gospel, we read: “**Jesus took bread**, and when **he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples**” (Mt 26:26).

What we have in the parable of the multiplication of loaves is a foretaste of the Eucharist.

This story must be understood in the Eucharistic perspective. We can deduce from the rapprochement between the two events that Jesus’ teaching to the crowds in today’s parable was inspired by the mystery of the Eucharist.

Speaking at some length with the crowds, Jesus was telling them that life is not something that we have to keep for ourselves and retain greedily. On the contrary, the disciples are called to offer and give their lives to God and to their brothers and sisters in humanity, just as Jesus did with his own life: ‘This is my body given up for you’.

We relate to God in prayer as a son relates to his father, listening and speaking to him. In prayer we praise God, discern his will and receive the strength to do it.

In our good fraternal relationships, made up of love, respect and service, mercy prevails over selfishness.

In Jesus’ blood, God has made a new covenant with his people. The good news is that in Jesus God is with us. But are we with him? Are we faithful to the Lord’s covenant of love with his people?

Jesus poured out his blood for the forgiveness of our sins, for our reconciliation with the Father. This is also good news, because we are so overwhelmed by the weight of our sins, our guilt and our shame. Jesus does not close his eyes before our sins. He knows them. But if we repent, his justice blooms into mercy. He forgives us, because he is not only a man, but he is God, and in God human justice opens up into divine mercy.

With two fish and five loaves, the disciples – thanks to Jesus’ miracle- were able to feed 5000 people, to say nothing of women and children. With the little we have, the Lord can do great things through us. But we have to play our part by using the little we have for the good of others. For example, during these days we pray more intensely for peace in the world. But peace will happen only if we begin by making peace at home, with those who are our nearest neighbours. God will do the rest. In a sense, peace in the world is obviously in God’s hands, but it is also in our own hands. Let us play our part! Amen.