

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
(2 kings 4:42-44 / John 6:1-15)
25.07.2021

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today, we begin to read in chapter 6 of St John's gospel. This section of the gospel, known as 'the Bread of Life discourse', will retain our attention for five consecutive Sundays. These readings come around every three years. This happens because the gospel of Mark which is read throughout Year B of the 3 year cycle is not long enough to offer a passage for every Sunday of ordinary time. As for the choice of the chapter 6 of John's gospel to fill the gap, it probably comes from the fact that the discourse on the Bread of Life is regarded as very important to the life of every Christian community. In John's gospel, there is no narrative of the institution of the Eucharist. This chapter is often read as the Johannine evocation of the sacrament of the Eucharist. To support this interpretation, we read at the beginning of today's gospel passage that this teaching was given 'shortly before the Jewish feast of Passover'. And we know that the Eucharist was instituted at the occasion of the Passover meal.

Today we read the first part of the discourse which recounts for us the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fish. This is a narrative that we find in the three synoptic gospels as well as in John's account.

We remember that Jesus came into the world to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God, that is to say, to reveal the love of his heavenly Father for all people without exception.

We should note that Jesus preached not only by words but also by actions: Just as He spoke, so also He healed the sick. Their healing was a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God.

It is important to note that Jesus had a 'holistic' approach in regard to those to whom he preached. What do we mean by the adjective 'holistic'? Jesus not only preached to the soul and mind of his listeners, talking about spiritual matters. Jesus was also interested by peoples' whole person: He cared for their soul, their mind and their bodies with all their basic needs. He knew that the crowds who were listening to him were in a deserted place, a place where there was no possibility of buying something to eat. He could see that they were hungry and He felt that He had to do something to alleviate their hunger to strengthen them for their return journey to their homes. The multiplication of the loaves and fish was a sign of Jesus' compassion for those to whom he spoke. It is for this reason that at the end of the day he multiplied loaves and fish to nourish the crowd.

The multiplication of the loaves and the fish which occurred on the evening of a long day of preaching, teaches us something important about the spiritual life. It shows us that the spiritual life is not only about the life of our soul and mind, but about the life of our whole person: our soul, our mind and our body. The spiritual life is not about loving God alone, but about loving God and our neighbour as ourselves. To the scribe's question: "Which is the first of all the commandments?", Jesus replied: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your

neighbour as yourselves. There is no commandment greater than these". The first and greatest commandment has an all inclusive dimension to it. It includes love of God and love of our neighbour as well as love of ourselves. The spiritual life is not about forgetting our neighbour and ourselves in order to better love God. The spiritual life is about loving God, as well as our neighbour and ourselves. Our neighbour and ourselves are part of our spiritual life. We cannot say that we love God if we don't at the same time love our neighbour as ourselves.

It happens that each one of us meets with difficulties in our life of prayer. At times prayer can become boring and seem to be leading us nowhere. So, either we stop praying or else, in the best case scenario, we look for spiritual remedies. We read more books about prayer, which is not bad; but to read books about prayer is not to be praying! Another remedy is to speak with someone about our difficulty with prayer. As we speak, we are often led to recognize that we are also meeting with difficulties in our relational life with others... and, in fact, it is this difficulty in our relationships with others which is blocking our life of prayer. The way forward is to look at the difficult relationships in our lives and often we will find that our prayer takes off again. Jesus invites us to have a 'holistic' approach to the spiritual life, a 'holistic' approach to the human person, a 'holistic' approach to all that constitutes our existence.

Jesus could have nourished the crowds by himself alone. But he chose to do so with the help of a small boy who had five barley loaves and two fish with him. Jesus used these five loaves and two fish to nourish a crowd of 5000 men, without counting women and children! There is a lesson for us here. Each one of us, with the little we have received, can contribute to the coming of the kingdom of God. We have all received a talent which we can use for the coming of the kingdom. The coming of the kingdom among us is Jesus' affair but it cannot happen without our participation. The coming of the Kingdom of God is the affair of Jesus with the help of each one of us. We all have a part to play, a small but indispensable part! Each time we reveal God's love to someone, the kingdom of God is coming about through us. In a mosaic, each little stone is important. Its shape, its colour, its place is indispensable to the beauty of the ensemble.

The gospel tells us that when the crowds had eaten enough, they picked up the pieces left over and filled twelve hampers with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves". When Jesus cares for us, he does it abundantly. He is not mean. During this holiday season, as we enjoy some fine weather and the beauty of creation, how can we not be grateful to God our creator for the beauty of the creation he has confided to us. The Lord wants to see us enjoy and care for it. With our eyes and our ears, we are immersed in a symphony of colours, sounds and smells. A feeling of well-being, fulfilment and peace invades us. We should be grateful to God the Father and his Son Jesus who care for us with such abundance. The risk for us is just to take everything for granted, to be short-sighted and to fail to be thankful.

Let us ask the Lord to enlarge the eyes of our hearts, so that we may identify the basic needs of our neighbours and fulfil them as best as we can with the Lord's help.