

Commentary on the Gospel: Bread That Gives Eternal Life

Gospel for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B), and commentary.

Gospel (*Jn 6:1-15*)

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased. Jesus went up into the hills, and there sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.

Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, “How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?”

Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.”

Now there was much grass in the place; so the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten

their fill, he told his disciples,
“Gather up the fragments left over,
that nothing may be lost.”

So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!”

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself.

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Commentary

Today's Gospel narrates the multiplication of loaves and fish, a miracle that took place on a spring day, since Christ made the multitude sit down on the abundant grass on

the ground (cf. *Jn* 6:10). Jesus first puts a question to Philip, in order to prepare him to receive the miracle with faith: How can we feed so many people? God wants to rely on our assistance, as a way of making us grow in faith and daring, and to unite us more intimately to his life.

Andrew brings to Jesus a young fellow who has five barley loaves and two fish. Our Lord gives thanks and multiplies it in abundance. We don't know exactly how the miracle occurred. In the multiplication of bread related by Matthew, Jesus asks his disciples to distribute the food (cf. *Mt* 14:19). And perhaps, as some Fathers of the Church think, the bread kept replenishing itself in the baskets as the disciples were distributing it, as took place in the case of Elisha's miracle for the widow, when the oil kept flowing from the jar (cf. *2 Kgs* 4:1-7).

Saint John specifies that the Passover was near. A little later, in the same chapter, the Evangelist relates the discourse on the Bread of Life. John's narrative therefore contains a clear symbolic reference to the paschal mystery and the Eucharistic mystery. In this passage some words in the Greek – including the verb *eucharistein* in v. 11 (“to give thanks”) and the word *klasma* in v. 12 (“fragment”) – have a clear Eucharistic connotation. The first is found in Luke and Paul (cf. *Lk* 22:19; *1 Cor* 11:23): the second, in the very ancient text of the *Didache*, written at the end of the first century.

The liturgy of the Mass for this Sunday confirms this symbolism when it presents in the first reading the episode of the multiplication of bread by the prophet Elisha. What is emphasized here is the abundance of God's gifts. Elisha says: “Give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus

says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have some left’” (2 Kgs 4:43). In this case there were twenty loaves for only a hundred men. Jesus’ miracle is much more abundant. Psalm 145 invites us to give thanks for the nourishment God gives us, which we see both in the miracle of the multiplication of bread and in the Eucharist. “The eyes of all look to thee, and thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:15-16).

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4; cf. Deut 8:3). Christ, the living Word of the Father, nourishes us with the Word and the Sacraments. The Word fills our hearts with peace and joy, and also nourishes our intellect, since the *Logos*, the eternal Word of God, gives meaning to our lives. Saint John invites us to believe in Jesus,

who is our nourishment, as the discourse on the Bread of Life proclaims (cf. *Jn* 6:26-59), a bread that bestows eternal life (cf. *Jn* 6:58). This is the key hope of Christians, which the Letter to the Ephesians presents in a hymn to the unity of the Church: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (*Eph* 4:4-5). Since they are nourished by the same Bread, Christians become the Body of Christ; in the celebration of the Eucharist, the People of God is transformed into this Body.

The prayer over the gifts in today’s Mass says that the bread and wine that have just been offered to the Lord are the fruit of his largesse, of his generosity. In the Eucharist, God gives himself to us, and at the same

time permits us to offer ourselves. The measure of this gift is love: love entails the gift of oneself, with joyful self-sacrifice. Jesus refuses to let himself be proclaimed king, since his kingship is one of love and sacrifice. “With our Lord, the only measure is to love without measure.”[1]

Our Lady is the Mother of Fair Love (cf. *Sir* 24:24). Such a good Mother will teach us how to respond generously to God’s abundant gifts, and to give thanks for the immense gift of the Eucharist, a manifestation of Jesus’ love for his Father and for all mankind.

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[1] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 232.

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