

the Sunday Readings



*One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many."
(John 6:8-9)*

17th Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

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*a foretaste of God's reigning*¹

introduction

The gospel readings for the next five Sundays are from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. The story of the multiplication of the loaves appears in all four gospels. The details differ from gospel to gospel, because each gospel editor is shaping the story to emphasise what he wants his particular audience to understand. John is writing towards the end of the first century of the Christian era, to people who have lived past the expected second coming. They are asking, "Where is Jesus?" As John tells the story of Jesus' public ministry, Jesus is teaching his audience, to recognise the presence of the Risen Christ in their midst.

As John tells the story, Jesus does not tell the disciples to feed the people themselves. Nor does he give the disciples the food to distribute. Rather John says that, "Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining . . ." We notice the eucharistic language. John will not have a description of Jesus instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper. However, John clearly alludes to the Eucharist as he describes Jesus feeding the people in today's gospel reading.

first reading: 2 Kings 4: 42 - 44²

[Elisha feeds a hundred men]

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."(42) But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'"(43) He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.(44)

Twenty barley loaves and fresh grain are brought to the man of God, Elisha (v.42). It is objected that it is not enough to feed the hundred-strong crowd. Behaving as master of the situation, Elisha ignores the objection. This Elisha story isn't concerned with a miracle as an exception to the laws of nature. That's a Greek and modern Western concern, foreign to the mental world of the Israelites. Elisha's miracle is above all a sign that the Lord's marvellous creative power is active and does good. The Lord's servant is able to give people relief from distress, health, nourishment and life. The focus is on *the holy One's* life-giving Word and the prophet's insistence on distributing the food that has been produced. Elisha is enabled to make available the sustenance of God, in the form of satisfying food.

1 Cover Image: The Feeding of the Five Thousand artist unknown, 13th century stained glass.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

response: Psalm 145 : 10 – 11, 15 – 18

[the greatness & goodness of God]

*All Your works shall give thanks to You, O Lord,
and all Your faithful shall bless You.(10)
They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom,
and tell of Your power,(11) . . .
The eyes of all look to You,
and You give them their food in due season.(15)
You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.(16)
The Lord is just in all His ways,
and kind in all His doings.(17)
The Lord is near to all who call on Him,
to all who call on Him in truth.(18)*

A joyous and grateful expression of confidence in God the Creator. The speaker emphasises the Lord reigning in majesty (v.10) – the presence of the holy One as faithful Creator. The psalm celebrates the order in God's work of creation. God not only governs, but surprises, inverts and gives unwarranted gifts to unlikely creatures! God's reign of power is mobilised to care for the otherwise uncared for. The psalm asserts that God is known in the reliable feeding processes (vv.15–16) and the great cosmic claim of creation is linked to the daily gifts of nourishment and sustenance. The experience of the Lord's nourishing protection is granted especially to those who call and fear. So the equilibrium of the world is experienced best by those who live contentedly with the Lord's expectations (v.18f). *Psalm 145* understands creation as the mode of equilibrium, coherence and reliability. Such a presentation of life reflects the experience and interests of the 'well off'. Such 'high' faith seems often to come with such a social location. We have to take such faith and its social setting seriously.

second reading: Ephesians 4 : 1 – 6

[unity in the body of Christ]

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,(1) with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,(2) making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.(3) There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,(4) one Lord, one faith, one baptism,(5) one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.(6)

Saint Paul clarifies the meaning of Jesus' message as Lord. The love of God, revealed in Jesus, forms us into one body, one hope. This implies mutual service in the different parts of the body. Therefore we have to ask ourselves: as Christians, are we ready for this in our torn-apart world? However little we may have, are we willing to share? Sharing bread is the world of life. The author appeals to readers to live according to their calling as Christians. That means humble and patient

effort to maintain the bond of peace that exists among them (vv.2-3). Life within the Christian community must bear witness to the church's belief that in Christ, all creation (including the different peoples of the world) has been made one.

The unity of the church must mirror the unity of all creation. The Christian community cannot be an exception to this unity. The unity in God is the basis of the unity of the Christian's calling. The whole shape of the Christian faith proclaims a united structure – *one* body, *one* faith, *one* baptism! All this unity of faith flows from the *one Spirit, one Lord and one Father of us all*.³ The shape of the 'good life' in society has a trinitarian pattern.

gospel reading: John 6 : 1 – 15

[the feeding of the five thousand]

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.(1) A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.(2) Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.(3) Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.(4) When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"(5) He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.(6) Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."(7) One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, (8) "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"(9) Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.(10) Then Jesus 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. (11) When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."(12) So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.(13) When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."(14) When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.(15)

Jesus withdrew across the lake.⁴ A great crowd pursue him. They're impressed more by his raising up the sick, than the meaning of his practise. Jesus is embarrassed by the unruly growth of this popular movement. He climbed a hillside and sat there with his disciples. Mention of *passover time*, gives a clue to the significance of what follows. When Jesus taught about the reigning of God, he spoke of *a great supper* to which the invitation went out: "*Come, for all is now*

³ [vv.4-6] Seven elements of unity.

⁴ [v.1] 'The other side' – the eastern shore. Tiberius, so named after the city, founded by Herod Antipas about A.D.20 in honour of Tiberius Caesar.

prepared".⁵ Philip suggests buying themselves something to eat and speaks of two hundred denarii.⁶

Jesus puts in practise the meaning of the parable about God's reigning; the disciples assist in distributing the food.⁷ The bread becomes *the Bread of the Kingdom – the Bread of Life*. The bread is distributed and the crowd is filled. The emphasis isn't on buying with money – but on giving what they have! It seems that's most important – is not the multiplying of loaves and fish – but rather, the opposition to a system of trade that governs exchanges of money. It promotes a *contribution ethos*. In a society dominated by those who have economic and social power and control, we can have bread only for money. To affirm sharing wealth, introduces a subversive element into a society that bases it's values on controlling wealth.

This narrative of Jesus' feeding the crowd, climaxes his practise in Galilee. When they had eaten enough, Jesus saw before him an army without a leader; a danger to themselves and to everyone else. A revolt in the desert was threatening. Jesus' power seemed to equip him excellently for leadership. In the hills after this, Jesus may have been tempted to aim at an earthly kingship. Jesus quickly leaves the scene. He has failed to produce the effect he intended.

Signs of this renewal are present in the world wherever the grace of God is shown and human beings work for justice, love and peace. John makes plain what Mark leaves unstated – that Jesus abandoned his public ministry in Galilee when he was apparently at the height of his popularity, because he had aroused a militant, nationalistic messianic hope.⁸ The misunderstanding of this among the crowd, marked the end of Jesus' attempt to lead a mass movement. Now Jesus begins a different course. This course led to Jerusalem, the temple, and the cross.

5 Cf. *Lk.14:17*

6 [v.7] *Six months' wages = two hundred denarii*. The denarius was the usual day's wage for a labourer.

7 [v.9] *Barley loaves*: – the food of the poor.

8 [v.15] *'to make him king'* – as a political Messiah opposing Rome; but Jesus would not accept this (Cf. *Jn.18:36*).

for sharing:⁹

- *Elisha like Jesus, displays an absolute trust in God's Word. **Comment on 2 Kings 4 : 42 – 44***
- *The author of the letter appeals to Israelite Christians and non-Israelite Christians to live in unity. That means patient effort at keeping the bond of peace that exists among them. The unity of the Christian community must mirror the unity of all creation. **Comment on Ephesians 4 : 1 – 6***
- *Jesus' practise opens up the vision of the divine rule which has been promised as the final renewal of creation – and is a foretaste of it. **Comment on John 6 : 1 – 15***

prayer:¹⁰

*O God,
 You open wide Your hand,
 giving us food in due season.
 Out of Your never-failing abundance,
 satisfy the hungers of body and soul
 and lead all peoples of the Earth
 to the feast of the world to come.
 We make our prayer
 through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

9 Lectio Divina: reading God's Word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

10 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

review:¹¹

Like the crowd in the story, we stand situated between an old, closed, hopeless world and the new, open and gifted world voiced in the liturgy. We are at a moment between the old shape of reality that brings no life, and the new shape of reality, that promises life more abundantly. We must host this moment with respect, awe and patience. For Jesus' first disciples the moment of worship is a moment of deep ambiguity that must not be rushed. It's that precious moment on the threshold, that makes serious transformations possible. As the liturgy leads us beyond the hegemony of the Western scientific explanation of '*natural laws*' to be amazed at the interventions of the true Power For Life-giving for us, we enter a season of standing on the threshold when the Spirit of Jesus may bring newness. Such conduct is dangerous if we come expecting doctrinal certainty or moral absolutes.

But if affirmations of trust in *the God of Life* is what we intend, the risk must be run. In our fearful desperate society, we have few occasions for such experience. *The moment of Eucharistic Worship* is the primary place of this experience. The manifestation of visible signs of the invisible reality of God's self-giving in Christ. We come to this moment with the strange expectation that we will be subverted. The texts of the liturgy is claimed to be the '*Word of God*'. In a mixture of wonder and weariness, of confidence and trembling – partly out of habit; partly in passionate hope – we respond, "*Thanks be to God.*"

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11 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.