

18TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
GOD'S GENEROSITY

“Give them something to eat yourselves’ ... ‘All we have is five loaves and two fish’ ... ‘Bring them to Me” (Matt. 14: 16, 17, 18)

For the past weeks, we have been listening to Jesus’ models of the Kingdom of Heaven presented in beautiful picturesque parables that were both familiar to the people of His time and insightful for us in our age. The images of the sower/the seed, the soils, the mustard seeds, the treasure, the pearl, the yeast, the dragnet and the fish all drawn from the Gospel of Matthew 13 offered lasting memory content for our reflection. We hope and pray these will stay fresh in our minds for a long time so that we will remember always to seek first the Kingdom God and its righteousness (Matt. 6: 33).

On this Eighteenth Sunday, our focus turns to God’s generosity. In the First Reading (Is. 55), God’s generosity is manifest in the prophetic vision of the messianic age, when God would restore the promise made to their ancestor David: “Come to the water, all you who are thirsty! You, who have no money, come receive grain and eat; come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk!” (Is. 55: 1). It is okay for us to first consider this generous offer in a material sense of God providing food for His people and catering for their needs, but it is most significant we consider what God is offering us in essence as something far greater and more sublime, it is the gift of the Spirit. St John expounds this notion when Jesus, in fulfilment of this prophecy stood and said aloud: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of flowing water will flow from within them.” St. John writes: “By this He (Jesus) meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.” (Jn. 7: 37-38). The gift of the Spirit is offered freely to us. But let us not lose sight of the fact that this is a gift and an invitation. Therefore, only those who respond positively and open their hearts to it will benefit from the offer.

St. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, writing in the Second Reading (Rom. 8: 35, 37-39) to the young Church and Christians in Rome, who were experiencing persecutions viewed God’s generosity from the perspective of His constant love. This love provides both the strength to conquer all trials and ensure victory.

Therefore, he concluded: “Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ ... For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 5: 35, 38-39). For us, going through this pandemic, we can certainly say with St. Paul that not even coronavirus in all its seeming invincibility and threats can separate us from the love of God. For we are more than conquerors through Christ, Whose Blood covers and shields us. Be not afraid, dear friends.

This theme of God’s generosity continues in the Gospel (Matt. 14: 13-21): Jesus, hearing of the murder of John the Baptist by Herod, withdrew to a lonely place to be alone with His disciples. You can tell the news touched Him in a very deeply. John was His cousin. This must have reminded Him of the persecution, betrayal and crucifixion that awaited Him. He needed to be alone to process and absorb these things. Sometimes in life we need to withdraw to seek understanding and guidance, not simply for what has been but for the unknown that lay ahead of us. Our Lord did that, why don’t you?

But when Jesus and the disciples stepped ashore, they saw a large crowd already waiting for them. The people had gone on foot by the shore and therefore got there faster than Jesus, Who was on a boat. How did Jesus respond to this? Remember His aim was to be alone with His disciples in a quiet place. In all cases, Jesus always considered others first: for while the personal need for a quiet place was important to Him, He prioritised the needs of the people as superior to His and attended to them: “... He took pity on them and healed their sick” (Matt. 14: 14). Here Jesus manifests God’s generosity in His selflessness, availability and attention. Each of us is a priority in the sight of God, therefore, our needs come first. Let our hearts be challenged by the exemplary respond of Jesus to always consider the needs of others before our personal needs. At different times, we become servants: as servants, availability remains the key to effectiveness. “I came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20: 28).

God always has the best plans: “When evening came, the disciples went to Him and said: ‘This is a lonely place, and the time has slipped by; so send the people away, and they can go to the villages to buy themselves some food.’” This was no doubt an expression of concern for the people by the disciples. They were

empathetic and proffered a solution that could address the hunger of the people. This was a realistic human approach to the situation. But Jesus had other plans – He always does. There is no need to send them away, Jesus said: “Give them something to eat yourselves.” I can imagine the reaction of the disciples: “What! Lord, what are You talking about? Look, ‘All we have with us is five loaves and two fish.’” This was the most inadequate, insufficient quantity of food compared to the crowd that numbered about five thousand men. But Jesus knew what He was going to do, and so He said to them: “Bring them here to Me.” Let these words of Jesus echo in our hearts and awaken in us the courage to rise up and go to Jesus. He needs us as we are: in our inadequacy and insufficiency; in our limitations and weaknesses and in our sicknesses and sinfulness. He knows exactly what to do with us. You may not be good enough, in fact, you may never be good enough; but He can and is ready to make you whole.

The Two-fold Miracle: The miracle that ensued, the feeding of five thousand men with five loaves and two fish points in two directions – to the old and the new. It points to the old exodus, when God, through Moses, fed His people with miraculous manna for forty years through the wilderness and desert. Here Jesus is the new Moses, Who feeds the new people of God with bread leading them to a greater exodus. More than that, this miracle also points to the Last Supper, the sign of the New Covenant and the Eucharist. There are striking similarities between this miracle and what took place at the Last Supper: both took place in the evening; in this miracle, the people reclined on the grass, at the Last Supper, the disciples reclined on the table; in both events, Jesus took the bread, raised His eyes, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave to His disciples. This was a Eucharistic miracle, where the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus was concealed in physical species. In the Eucharist, the Lord Jesus offers us His Body and Blood. May we receive Him with thanksgiving, reverence and love. May the Eucharist ignite in us the fire of compassion and selflessness to respond to Jesus as He says: “Give them something to eat yourselves.”