

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
THE FEEDING OF THE MULTITUDE: Even the Little can Become Great in
His Hands

“There is a little boy here with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that between so many?” (Jn. 6: 9)

Why John, and why John 6 in Liturgical Cycle B? This question arises because in Cycle B we are supposed to be reading from the Gospel of Mark. But here we are reading from the Gospel of John. Last week, we read from the Gospel of Mark 6: 30-34. In this pericope, the Twelve returned from their mission, and recounted their exciting experiences to Jesus, Who invited them to come away to some lonely place, and rest for a while. On reaching there by boat, the people, who guessed correctly where they were going, got there before them on foot. Jesus took pity on them and set out to teach them “for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” The remaining part of the Gospel of Mark 6 gives accounts of two main miracles – the multiplication of loaves and the walking on the water. The Gospel of John 6 offers John’s presentation of the same accounts (Jn. 6: 12-15; 16-21 respectively). Therefore, it is as though we are continuing the reading of Mark in the language of John. Moreover, in John, there is a deeper development of the theology of the eucharist, or what scholars prefer to call “The Bread of Life Discourse” beginning from verse 22. Thus, in John, the miracle of the multiplication of loaves was a “preface” to Jesus’ self-presentation as “The Bread of Life.” By this “digression”, the Church offers us this great gift, in the typical form of “Marcan Sandwich”, so that we can savour the theological richness of the Eucharist in its origins, as it relates to some of the key Old Testament events and its importance or relevance to our Christian lives. We shall return to the Gospel of Mark from the 22nd Sunday.

Elisha And Jesus: The First Reading (2 Kings 4: 42-44) recounts the multiplication of twenty barley loaves to a hundred people by the prophet Elisha. This miracle prefigures the Messiah, Who would establish and invite us to “come and buy bread and eat without money” within the context of the New Covenant (Is. 55: 1-2). The confidence of Elisha in God, Who provides bread for the hungry and can multiply the insufficient twenty barley loaves points to the faith of Jesus in His Father in the miracle of today’s Gospel. Like in the Gospel miracle the bread used is barley loaves. This was the commonest bread, the food for the poor. From the simple things of the earth, God can do great things. Never underestimate the value of little things or little persons. However, the miracle of Jesus is far greater than that of Elisha because Elisha’s was only a pointer to Someone Greater and something higher. Elisha had a higher number of loaves (20) compared to Jesus’ (5) to feed a lesser number of people (100) compared to Jesus’ (5, 000). In both miracles, there were leftovers. We are not told how much was leftover in Elisha’s, but Apostles of Jesus picked 12 baskets full. Nothing should be wasted. In this time of scarcity and poverty, this challenges us, who have more than we need, who hoard and acquire excessively only to throw away.

Scarcity of Faith: The crowds followed Jesus not because they believed Him for Who He is but out of sheer curiosity aroused by the signs they had witnessed. They saw Him as a wonderworker (Jn. 2: 25; 4: 48). The disciples, who had witnessed the turning of water into wine at Cana (Jn. 2: 1-11), still thought of the possibility of feeding the multitude in simple human calculations. Sometimes all we need is to have faith and see Jesus beyond the ordinary limitations of man. Our relationship with Jesus, including the way we pray, and the reasons we pray reflect our misconceptions of Jesus. To many, Jesus is a wonderworker and a magician who can cause things to come about by mere invocations. Jesus is truly God, Who needs our faith and participation to get miracles through. In this miracle, we see the contributions of Andrew, who introduced the boy and the generosity of the boy. Jesus needs us as well.

The Generosity of the Little Child: I just thought to myself: "What would Jesus do if that little boy refused to offer his fish and bread?" One thing I know and can really say is that He would not have forced the boy. We then would have lost one gift of a miracle. We never can tell what our little "Nos" have caused us. We can never imagine our immense contributions when we can say "Yes." We never can tell what would happen if we brought our problems to Jesus. In his Homily, Bede, the Venerable allegorically explains this little boy's gift thus: "The five loaves are the Five Books of the Torah; the two fish are the Prophets and the Psalms, and young boy is the Jewish people. When Jesus receives the Old Testament Scriptures from the Jews, he breaks open their deeper, spiritual meanings to refresh the multitudes. This is just what we are going to encounter in the next five Sundays.

Nothing is too Small: The little boy's gift was certainly not enough: "There is a little boy here with five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that between so many?" No doubt, by all human standards and calculations, that was nothing! But with Jesus, it is not the quantity that matters, but availability. As Christians, we should see beyond human means. St. Paul exhorts us to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 cor. 5: 7). We need to see by faith even more. We are challenged by this to present ourselves to the Lord as we are – inadequate, frail, sinful and insufficient. The Lord will make us whole. Similarly, our problems may be insurmountable and larger-than-life but when we surrender them to the Lord, He makes the impossible possible.

My dear friends, what we have may not be enough but, when we present it to the Lord, He can make the difference. It depends on whose hands they are in; our situations may seem irreparable, it all depends on whose hands we entrust them. If we surrender them to the Lord's Hands, He surely will change the stories into great miracles.

Let me end with this write up by an Unknown Author:

A basketball in my hands is worth about \$19.

A basketball in Michael Jordan's hands is worth about \$33 million.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

A baseball in my hands is worth about \$6.

A baseball in Mark McGwire's hands is worth about \$19 million.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

A tennis racket is useless in my hands.

A tennis racket in Venus Williams' hands is a Wimbledon Championship.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

A rod in my hands will keep away a wild animal.

A rod in Moses' hands will part the mighty sea.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

A sling shot in my hands is a kid's toy.

A sling shot in David's hands is a mighty weapon.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in my hands is a couple of fish sandwiches.

Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in God's hands will feed thousands.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

Nails in my hands might produce a birdhouse.

Nails in Jesus Christ's hands will produce salvation for the entire world.

It depends on whose hands it's in.

As you see now it depends on whose hands it's in. So put your concerns, your worries, your fears, your hopes, your dreams, your families and your relationships in God's hands because ...

It depends on whose hands it's in.