

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday – Food Scarcity

*A reading from the holy Gospel according to John: (Jn. 6: 1-15)*

Jesus went off to the other side of the Sea of Galilee - or of Tiberias - and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he gave by curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside, and sat down there with his disciples. It was shortly before the Jewish feast of Passover.

Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, "Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?" He only said this to test Philip; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do.

Philip answered, "Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them a small piece each." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish' but what is that between so many?"

Jesus said to them "Make the people 'sit down.'" There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down.

Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and gave them out to all who were sitting ready; he then did the same with the fish giving out as much as was wanted'. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, "Pick up the pieces left over so that nothing gets wasted."

So they picked them up, and filled twelve hampers with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves. The people, seeing this sign that he had given, said: "This really is the prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, who could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king escaped back to the hills by himself.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord.*

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Some eight hundred and fifty years before Jesus was born, there appeared in Israel a famous prophet, Elijah by name. A prophet was indeed needed; Ahab, king of Israel, had married a pagan princess, Jezebel, a truly wicked woman. Under her influence, most of the people were led to worship Baal, a famous idol in the region.

Elijah fought all his life to bring the people of Israel back to the worship of Yahweh; to help him in his task God gave the prophet extraordinary miraculous powers.

- Towards the end of his life, God instructed Elijah to pick up a successor, Elisha, a well-to-do farmer. Elijah went in search of him and found him ploughing the fields in the company of a number of his servants. As soon as Elijah cast his mantle on Elisha, the Spirit of God took possession of him. There and then Elisha offered to God in sacrifice the two bullocks with which he was ploughing, abandoned all his possessions and followed his master (1 Kings 19: 19-21)

- When soon after, Elijah was taken up to heaven, his mantle dropped to the ground. Elisha picked it up, and with the mantle, the miraculous powers of his master passed on to him (2 Kings 2: 13)

- We find Elisha exercising those miraculous powers in the first reading of this Sunday. As he was surrounded by a large number of disciples, about a hundred of them, a farmer came to offer to him the yearly first fruits of his harvest, consisting of twenty loaves of bread made from the first barley harvested and some freshly-cut ears of corn.

*We read in the first reading: "A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing Elisha, the man of God, bread from the first fruits, twenty barley loaves and fresh grain in the ear. "Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said. But his servant replied, "How can I serve this to a hundred men?" "Give it to the people to eat," he insisted, "for the Lord says this: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" He served them; they ate and had some over, as the Lord had said."*

Those loaves of bread were totally insufficient to feed the hundred and over persons present, yet Elisha ordered his servant to lay them in front of them for their meal. The servant objected but Elisha insisted. The result..? All those present ate as much as they wanted and there was still bread left.

- The Church narrates this Sunday this Old Testament episode as a background to the multiplication of loaves worked by Jesus. There is a reason behind it: *the gifts which the Messiah brought to mankind are far more abundant than anything found in the Old Testament.* Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty loaves; Jesus, fed five thousand with just five loaves.

Whatever happened in the Old Testament was meant to serve *as a sign of better things to come* under the Messiah. God went on patiently for many years preparing the coming of his Son into the world.

### **[The multiplication of loaves worked out by Jesus]**

- All the four Gospels narrate the *miracle of the multiplication of the loaves* (Mt. 14: 13-21; Mk. 6: 32-44; Lk. 9: 10-17; Jn. 6: 1-15). It was one of those key-events in the life of Jesus and took place just before the Jewish Feast of the Passover, exactly one year before Jesus suffered and died. Matthew and Mark narrate *a second multiplication of loaves* which Jesus carried out some time later (Mt. 15: 32-39; Mk. 8: 1-10).

- John dedicates the whole of chapter 6 in his Gospel to convey a most important message: *Jesus becomes the spiritual food of all Christians; he offers himself to us in three ways: through faith in him, through his Word and in the Eucharist.*

Jesus worked the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves to prepare the people to *accept him as their spiritual food* since he knew they would find it difficult to grasp the lesson he would teach them the next day at Capernaum.

- We shall go through that lesson on the coming Sundays. Today, we shall limit ourselves *to one of the many lessons* we can learn from the miracle worked by Jesus: *God is concerned about the material sustenance of all his children in the world; he has arranged things in such a way that everyone might have the food he needs.*

Let us *briefly examine* the narration of John:

a) *No one asked Jesus to provide the crowd with food*: It was Jesus who first expressed his concern about the people's need of food.

Jesus asked *Philip's opinion* as to what could be done. A simple glance at the crowd told Philip that not even *200 denarii, more than half the yearly salary* of an ordinary worker, would suffice to give them even a morsel each.

Where human power could not reach, Jesus' power would. He did not make use of his divine power to satisfy his own hunger in the desert; but he would not hesitate to use it now to feed the people who had followed him all day to listen to his teaching.

b) *Jesus could have prepared food out of nothing*, yet, *he chose to make use of some loaves and fish which a boy provided*.

c) The four Gospels stress the point that *"they all ate, and ate as much as they wanted."* This makes one thing clear: *the generosity of Jesus* who never measures his gifts.

d) Again, the four Gospels take care to narrate that *Jesus ordered his apostles to collect the pieces left over*, and that they filled twelve baskets with them. These few details make several points clear:

- *God is concerned about the material food which man needs*. He wants everyone to have food enough for his living; he does not want people to go hungry.
- *We must not expect God to provide food for us miraculously*. God wants us to make use of what is available, and *"to multiply it"* through serious work.
- *He wants us to make good use of all his gifts, not wasting any*. This is particularly true of the food he provides; we should not waste it.
- Jesus wants us all to *keep in mind that no matter how wealthy we may be, food is always God's gift*. To help us realise our dependence on God, he included food among the various needs we should pray for daily: *"Give us today our daily bread "* (Mt. 6: 11)

[The problem of hunger in the world]

*One of the greatest tragedies of our time is the fact that millions of people are reduced to starvation throughout the world, especially in the so-called "third world countries." Thousands of children die daily of hunger and those who will survive will suffer the consequences of their hunger during childhood for life. In Kenya the situation is no better. There are many who go hungry because of lack of rain and the failure of crops. If, as we said above, God is concerned about the food people need, how is it that so many millions go hungry? Is he unwilling or is he powerless to remedy the situation?*

The answer is: God is neither unwilling nor powerless. It is God's determined will that no man, woman or child in the world should lack the food they need. Indeed we can say that if God could be sorry about something, he would be sorry for his hungry children.

- God has arranged the world in such a way, that every person may have the food he or she needs. He continues to work thousands and millions of miracles in nature to provide food for his children: the power to sprout which a seed contains, the way a grain grows and ripens, these and many more, are real wonders which God works in nature to feed us.

Food in the world should suffice to feed God's children but it will never suffice to fill the greed of those bent on exploiting them.

*So, whose fault is world-hunger?*

(a) *Certainly, hunger is not God's fault*: As we said, God so arranged the world that everyone may have sufficient food to eat.

(b) *Basically, hunger is the consequence of sin*: It is the consequence of our first parents' sin *and of our own personal sins as well*, just as all evils in the world are.

(c) *It is the consequence of the selfishness of people, rich people in particular*. They often get wealthier at the expense of the poor. They forget that their wealth is not exclusively theirs even when rightfully acquired, and that God wants them to share it with people in need.

(d) *Hunger is our own fault too*: It is no use blaming others when we go hungry; we should blame ourselves as well:

- to start with, we are not *the loving children of God that we should be*. We remember God when we are hungry but forget him when properly fed.
- *we do not work as we ought*; hunger is often the fruit of our own *laziness*.
- *we do not plan well*; we foolishly mortgage our fields to the money-lenders before harvest, or sell our fields for a little money which is soon spent, At harvest-time we go on feasting for days, without thought for the future; we do not harvest water when available, we don't want to more scientifically tested ways of cultivation and irrigation, and so on.

Parents, who for any of these reasons expose their children to hunger, are guilty of serious sin.

e) *Governments are particularly guilty of the hunger of their people*:

Most Governments blame hunger on the rapid increase of population, and resort to birth control to solve the problem. Unfortunately the growth in population is made into a scapegoat,.

*The national governments, including the Kenyan Government, spend millions upon millions to buy weapons, and waste lot of the money collected in taxes, most of the time out of pride, selfishness, rather than by the true good of their people. A small percentage of the money spent on weapons would suffice to wipe away overnight hunger from the world.*

*Then there is the corruption. Corruption at all levels in the administration eats up most of the money destined to produce more food; this money seldom reaches the poor for whom it is meant*

[3. Unity within the community would not only maintain us spiritually strong, but help also to make us economically self-sufficient:]

Last Sunday, we spoke about the havoc that dissension causes within the community and the many reasons that should move us to live in union and peace.

In the second reading of this Sunday taken from the same letter of St Paul to his Christians of Ephesus, the apostle who was then in jail at Rome, warns his Christians once again against the dangers of dissension and stresses the many reasons why Christians ought to unite:

a) *We must be united spiritually, because*:

- we all have the **same faith**, faith in Christ, Christ being the Lord whom we all serve.
- We all have received the **same Baptism** that washed away our sins.
- we all were given the **same Holy Spirit** who lives within us and makes us God's children.
- we all are called to share one day **God's life and joy in heaven**.

*b) God wants us united that we may better face the difficulties of life:*

Christians **should set the example** for non-Christians to join in a common effort to improve their situation and face difficulties, such as scarcity of food.

Sad to say, often, programmes started by the Government or by the Church to help us materially, failed for lack of unity. Jealousy, mutual mistrust, lack of honesty in administering funds and so on, ruined many a useful programme.

God cannot be happy when this happens, and it happens only too often.

4. *Let me conclude with a final detail from the Gospel:* As we said above, Jesus made use of five loaves and two fish which a boy had, to feed the whole crowd.

We can imagine Andrew going to the boy and telling him: **"The Master needs your bread and fish; would you give it to him?"** The boy could have protested: *"It is all I have; my mother prepared them for my evening meal. If I give them away, what shall I eat?"*

Fortunately, **the boy readily handed over the food he had**. And what was the fruit of his generosity: everyone ate as much as they wanted...

- The Gospel does not say what happened to that boy later in life; but we can imagine what happened **when he met Jesus at his death**. "Master", he must have said, *"I am the boy who gave you the bread and fish to feed the crowd."* Jesus needed no reminder of the favour; he must have welcomed the boy into heaven with such a smile ... !

- **The generosity of that boy contains a lesson for us all**: Often, we might have just the minimum to eat, and sometimes go hungry to bed. But we may be sure that there are **many people poorer than we are**. If we are generous enough to share the little we have, the Lord will never forget our generosity.

**Perhaps, the best remedy against hunger may be: to be generous with the hungry.**  
*[Mother Theresa narrates ....*

*So let us pray: Father in heaven, we thank you for your concern for whatever we need; listen to the prayers of hungry people throughout the world and hasten to their rescue. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen*