

Commentary to the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Introduction

“The Lord gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry” (Ps 146:7), are the words with which the pious Israelite professes his faith in providence. This is echoed by Mary in her song of praise: “He has filled the hungry with good things” (Lk 1:53). But how can these statements be true if a quarter of humanity live in conditions of absolute poverty, where every day tens of thousands of children die of hunger, if millions of people scramble the garbage looking for food? Has God who clothes the lilies of the field and feeds the birds of the sky perhaps forgotten his children? Why does the Father not hear the prayer of one who pleads with him every day: “Give us this day our daily bread?”

The poor are hungry, but the sated also find themselves sad, frustrated and alone; the gratification of possession lasts a few days, if not hours, then anxiety resurfaces and the inner emptiness forces one to start desperately searching for other goods. To have more, rather than be satiated, increases hunger and makes one enter into a no-exit vortex of death.

This spiral can be interrupted. It is possible to find the bread that satisfies and the banquet where the wine of joy abounds, but only one road leads to it; there are no shortcuts. The paths that pass near the boutiques, the jewelers and antique shops are imagined as “Streets of happiness”, but they are misleading. It is also the illusory path indicated by the preacher of miracles, one who invites to implore supernatural interventions; the Lord does not intend to replace man.

He promises a prodigy and it is his word that realizes it: where his gospel is accepted the hearts detoxify themselves of selfishness and solidarity and sharing,

bloom.

When these feelings arise, the hunger for bread disappears and the thirst for love is quenched.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“God makes use of people’s hands to feed his children.”

First Reading: Isaiah 55: 1-3

We are in Babylon, more than fifty years have already passed since Jerusalem was destroyed and since the sad period of exile began. The discouraged Israelites live in a foreign land. One day they hear the prophet's voice resounding. He announces the imminent fall of the Babilonian empire, the liberation and the return to the homeland.

In today's passage, this new condition is likened to a banquet in which there will be plenty of food and drink. To participate one won't need to spend money. It will be enough to hunger and thirst (v. 1).

The prophet, however, is aware that the majority of the exiles has neither hunger nor thirst. They are now settled in Babylon, good or bad, they have adapted themselves to the situation; they in fact do not think of building a new life in the country of origin. They prefer to stay where they are and if they put aside some savings, they invest to buy houses and fields for themselves in Mesopotamia; they are unwilling to take risks, to embark on adventures that can be tricky. In short, they are not interested in "the banquet"; they refuse the invitation.

The prophet insists, trying to make them think: yours is not a real life and who employs his own money to settle down in a foreign land is "spending money on what does not satisfy" (v. 2). Only he who has the courage to go will experience the joy of the new social reality prepared by the Lord. He was not heard. The groups of Israelites who left Babylon were few and sparse, the majority did not dare risk a new exodus. Those who returned then, did not find any banquet, they were badly received. They had to face hardships and difficulties of all kinds, so many doubted of having been deceived.

It took some time before Israel sensed the true meaning of the Lord's promises. They should not be interpreted physically; they would be realized, but not in the immediate future. The banquet was the symbol of salvation offered by God to all mankind.

The condition in which the deported found themselves in Babylon is an image of all slavery in which every man is struggling. The temptation to spend money for that which does not satisfy, the distrust of one who invites to the banquet and promises true joy, the fear to undertake the journey toward the land of freedom are always the same and recur continually.

God does not confront the evidence nor give convincing proofs, but calls for unconditional trust in what he promises. Only he who has already set foot in the banquet hall of the kingdom of heaven may testify that he had found the table spread. His joy can become contagious and convinces even the most wary to enter.

Second Reading: Romans 8:35, 37-39

What drives man to abandon the faith?

The most desperate circumstances: the sad events, but also the good fortune and success. When all goes well in life, a person may be tempted to do without God because he already has everything he wants. But it is the contrariety, the struggles, the hardships, the misfortunes that generate discomfort and may turn people away from God and Christ.

Paul sets out seven of these difficulties: “Will trials, anguish, persecution or hunger, lack of clothing or dangers or sword...?” (v. 35). They are just a few—those that Paul has experienced in his own flesh (2 Cor 11:24-33)—the list can be completed by each one with the addition of those from which one feels threatened. I try to list those that now imperil more than other the attachment to Christ: the fear of losing chances and opportunities to be happy; discouragement, the dejection in noting one’s own weaknesses and moral miseries; the shame that leads to not happily admitting one’s own mistakes; the remorse that makes one feel miserable, generates anxiety, leads to despair and doubt of being still loved by God.

The temptation to choose a life opposed to the principles of the gospel is always looming but Paul assures: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God and of Christ” (vv. 35.39). It was God who opens the game with humanity and he will close it, after having conducted as only he can do, that is, winning it.

Gospel: Matthew 14:13-21

If one reduces this miracle in a gesture of power made by Jesus to give proof of his divine powers, we must confront a number of unavoidable objections. It’s not very likely the moving of a crowd of many thousands of people. It is getting late. It precludes the impending fall of darkness which is not the most suitable time to distribute bread to so many people. From where did the twelve empty baskets they brought with them pop up? But the most provocative consideration is another one: what interest is there for today’s person that two thousand years ago, Jesus fed five thousand men, if then God permits that people continue to die for lack of bread?

What really happened that night in the vicinity of Lake Tiberias is difficult to establish. This is not what is important. In fact, the evangelists relate the episode in six versions, each with its own specific message. Let us try to grasp what the passage today wants to give us.

At the time of Jesus there was a widespread belief that the Messiah would accomplish extraordinary signs and wonders, which would have gathered and introduced the people into the desert where he would repeat the miracle of the manna.

Presenting Jesus coming into the desert followed by a great multitude of people who abandoned the city (v. 13), the evangelist wants us to see in him the new Moses. Israel had left Egypt and entered into the Promised Land but had not yet reached freedom and had not yet entered into communion with his God. Behold, now he is led back into the desert.

If one wants to push forward more parallelism it's sufficient to put the passage in its context. Matthew has just described the banquet organized for Herod's birthday, in which the Baptist's execution occurred (Mt 14:3-12). That banquet represents vividly the corrupt, oppressive and bloody society, that must be repudiated by those who follow Christ. It is in the desert that the foundations of a new society are laid.

Here are the features: first, it has Jesus as guide and his very own feelings as norm of mutual relations. He feels compassion (v. 14). The verb use—*splagknizomai*—is not a vague feeling of commotion, but a deep emotion, visceral (in greek the bowels are called *splagkna*). We've already found these term: "When he saw the crowd he was moved with pity, for they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36).

Jesus is sensitive to the needs of a person. He feels part and is involved intimately; it squeezes his heart but his commotion does not lead him to discouragement. He does not fall into curses, vain words of regret or sterile crying. He becomes a stimulus for immediate action in favor of one who suffers: "When he went ashore, he saw the crowd gathered there and he has compassion on them. And he healed their sick" (v. 14).

Com-*passion*, to suffer-together with the brothers are the force that leads the disciple to engage himself in the building a new society. Only one who has mastered the sensitivity of the Master is moved to intervene, to make his own same gestures of love. "Your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ had" (Phil 2:5)—Paul recommends: "Rejoice with those who are joyful, and weep with those who weep. Live in peace with one another" (Rom 12:15-16).

This urgent inner need to do good is the unmistakable sign of the presence in the disciple of the Spirit of Christ.

It's not only with sicknesses, the manifestations of weaknesses and fragility of man that Jesus is confronted with. Even the urgent need of food and lack of assets necessary for life are addressed. What is Jesus' response to the hunger in the world?

If the miracle is perhaps the solution, today's passage would not have much to tell us because no one is given the ability to do such wonders. With his gesture Jesus indicates what every disciple can and should do so that no one lacks bread. He does not resolve the problem of hunger without the cooperation of man.

The first, subtle temptation to watch out is that of disengagement, that of wanting "to dismiss the crowd" so that each one makes his own arrangement, going to the villages to buy something to eat (v. 15). It is the suggestion put forward by the disciples who, evidently, have not understood that adherence to Christ implies a concrete engagement in favor of those who are in need. They do not need to go—Jesus answers—"you give them something to eat" (v. 16).

The difficulty, which is also ours, is immediately raised: that what we have is not sufficient (v. 17).

If everyone keeps selfishly for himself what he has, in fear that one day he may lack the necessary, there will always be hunger in the world.

Jesus asks the disciples to give him what he has, even if it seems little to him. Five loaves and two fish—seven pieces of food—are the symbol of totality. Nothing is held back, the generosity should have no limits. The sharing of goods is Christ's proposal and is the only one in tune with God's plan. He is the Father and he wants his children to live as brothers and sisters. They do not accumulate for themselves nor hoard the goods destined to all. When everyone will put at the disposal of others what he has (not only money, but one's whole self, time, talents, intelligence, abilities ...) he will witness a miracle: there will be food for everyone and leftover. On the generosity of persons, the blessing of God pours out often.

The bread that Jesus distributes is not only the material one.

Like water, the bread was a symbol in Israel of God's wisdom. Both the prophets and the sages of the Old Testament allude to them often: Wisdom has laid her table—says the author of Proverbs—. To the senseless she says, “Come, eat and drink of the bread and wine I have prepared” (Pro 9:1-5). Amos announces that God will send hunger and thirst in the land: “not hunger for bread or thirst for water, but for hearing the word of Yahweh” (Am 8:11).

One day Jesus said: “One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). The food that he gives and that nourishes the life of man is his word, indeed, it is himself, the word of God that must be assimilated.

“Jesus took the loaves—Matthew says—and raised his eyes to heaven, pronounced the blessing and handed them to the disciples to distribute to the people” (v. 19) These words are familiar to us. They are those of the Eucharist. The evangelist takes them to make the Christians of his communities understand that, after having assimilated the bread of the gospel which is given to them through the preaching of the apostles the must also approach the Eucharistic banquet to be filled.

Five thousand men are fed. It is the number that symbolizes Israel. It is to this people that bread is offered. Israel is the first to be invited to the banquet announced by the prophets. After Israel will be satiated, twelve baskets of leftover are gathered. Twelve indicates the new community, constituted by the twelve apostles around Christ. To this new people bread will not be lacking—that is Christ—there will always be a remainder and each time he will resume the distribution.

Through his disciples—to whom he delivered his bread—Jesus himself is the one who continues to feed the people of all times and places.

Fernando Arminelli - Claretian Publications