

## “You give them something to eat”

**Eighteenth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – August 2, 2020**

**Readings:** Isa 55:1-3; Rom 8:35, 37-39; Mt 14:13-21

*Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”* (Mt 14:16)

Prologue: Food is the most basic of our human needs, always placed first in the trio of what is absolutely necessary for human survival: food, shelter, clothing or *roti-kapada-makaan*. Without food, we die. Apart from its physiological, nutritional value, food also has social, cultural, economic, religious and symbolic dimensions. Two readings speak of food, that can be used as a link for our theme.

### **Three Signposts from Scripture:**

1. The first reading opens up with: “*Thus says the Lord ...*” The Prophet (second-Isaiah), dwelling among those exiled in Babylon, speaks words of comfort on behalf of Yahweh, God, to a people in doubt, darkness and despair. He reminds them that God alone can satisfy their hunger and thirst. In picturesque language of plenitude, fullness, he invites them to a banquet, given freely, saying: “eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (v.2). Here, they will not only slake their thirst but also satisfy themselves with wine, milk and bread. Furthermore, God also promises that a new covenant will be made with them in the future—an everlasting covenant—in continuance with the covenant already made with David. Indeed, out of God’s “steadfast, sure love for David” (v.3) God will place one of his descendants on the throne of Judah. The descendant will be the Messiah whose reign will last forever. Note that the consumption of food and drink are sign of all covenants since they signify that the partners of the covenant are entering into a relationship—to be sustained (with food, bread) and celebrated (with drink, wine).
2. Today’s gospel passage of the ‘multiplication of the loaves and fishes’ is important since it appears six times in the four gospels. In the text of Matthew’s gospel, the focus is on the disciples who ultimately distribute the broken bread and the fish. This is probably to indicate that they are to be ministers to the Jesus community and pioneers of the Jesus Way. However, verse 15 tells us, “When it was evening, *the disciples came to him* and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’” Note the difference between Jesus’ disposition and that of the disciples. On the one hand, “Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had *compassion* for them and cured their sick” (v.14), and on the other hand, the disciples are advising him, “send the crowds away!” The disciples—very often like you and me—are fearful and faithless. Instead of being fearless and ‘faith-full’ since Jesus is in their midst, they seem content with washing their hands off the hungry—allowing those poor folks to go and buy food from some sellers and shopkeepers who’d probably charge an extra buck seeing so much of demand, so little supply! And, what about the moneyless and those who thought little about food and money in comparison to the spiritual nourishment and priceless pearls that Jesus was offering them by way of his healings, parables and teachings?
3. Rather than show irritation, disappointment and anger towards his disciples, Jesus puts the ball into their court: “*You give* them something to eat” (v.16). Instead of allowing them to shift responsibility onto ‘*them*’ for ‘*buying*’, Jesus tells his disciples that: ‘*you*’ must get

involved with ‘giving’ and ‘sharing’ so that even the ‘*anawim*’—those poor who have no money and who fearlessly and faithfully pray to Abba for ‘our daily bread’—may not go hungry but be satisfied. These *anawim* would then be flesh-and-blood examples and evidence of what Prophet Isaiah had foretold ages ago. Caught unawares and perhaps a little ashamed, the disciples say: “We have *nothing* here but five loaves and two fish” (v.17). Man’s nothing is God’s everything. When the marriage of *five* loaves and *two* fish—which make up the perfect number of *seven*—is prayed upon, “blessed and broken” (v.19) by God’s son, Jesus, a miracle takes place with a surplus of *twelve* basketfuls of bread and fish still waiting to be broken and shared even further! Divine superabundance, indeed! Note that the parallel passage in John’s gospel mentions that the loaves and fish were given to Jesus by a small boy. Isn’t it beautiful that a small boy handed over his whole tiffin-box to Jesus sensing that the Master would work wonders? Although there is no ‘covenant’ or ‘sacrifice’ mentioned here, commentators see here an allusion to the later Eucharist since there are the actions of Jesus blessing, breaking and distributing.

### **Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme of Food, Breaking, Giving, Sharing:**

The response to today’s psalm (144) says: “You open wide your hand, O Lord, and you grant our desires.” It adds: “The eyes of all creatures look to you and you give them their *food* in due time.” The second reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans begins with a rhetorical question: “Who will separate us from the *love* of Christ?” Obviously, no one! Nothing! The *raison d’être* of Christianity and of Christ’s Church is ‘*Love*’. Consequently, if God has such an immense, immeasurable and infinite love for you and me, why worry? Isn’t it stupid to be worrying about food-shelter-clothing?

### **Three Contextual Concerns:**

Christian Feeding Programs: India produced 291.95 million tons of food grains in 2019-20. Yet, 69% of the deaths of children under the age of 5 have been attributed to malnutrition by UNICEF. Global Hunger Index ranked India at 102<sup>nd</sup> position out of 117 nations, the lowest in South Asia. World Bank’s Human Capital Index scored India at 0.44, meaning, any Indian child will only reach 44% of its potential due to malnutrition. How will my personal and our church ‘*caritas*’ respond when Jesus says: “*You* give them something to eat”?

Christian Economic Packages: The former so-called ‘Christian West’ includes some of the richest nations of the world. The institutional Indian Church, too, has economic resources often disproportionately larger than its minority-self. When Pope Francis teaches us in *Laudato Si*’ (n.222): “We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible: it is the conviction that ‘*less is more*’,” can we tell our starving brethren, “go into the villages and *buy* food” for yourselves? And celebrate Eucharist?

Christian Disciples’ Project: Twelve disciples not only broke the bread given by Jesus, but also collected twelve baskets full—for more breaking and sharing. Can’t we offer up our ‘*nothing*’ to The One who can do *everything*?

**Story from Rabindranath Tagore:** The beggar sat by the roadside eagerly awaiting his King. When the chariot stopped, the beggar was surprised that the King stretched out his hand to him. Grudgingly, he dug into his bag and gave his King the tiniest grain. He wept bitterly that night when he saw only one grain of gold in his bag: “What I gave to my King is all I got back!” Can we give a little more than five loaves and two fish to Our Lord—for breaking and sharing?

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