

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings focus on the availability of spiritual food for those who recognise the need for the spirit to be nourished. Nobody would deny the vital importance of food for our bodies, but it is not so easy to recognise that our growth to authentic maturity as human beings depends critically on the development of our spiritual life. The one linguistic factor that stands out in these readings is that metaphor is the best way to give some expression to the inexpressible

Isaiah 55:1-3 The prophet Isaiah is addressing the Jerusalem community after the 50 years of exile in Babylon. In this passage he presents God as a market vendor crying out his wares to catch the attention of the passers-by. The poetry of these first lines is unmetrical, which only emphasises the call of the market vendor. The repetitions and variations intensify the point being made about the availability of spiritual nourishment. The second line is longer than the first and the third line is longer than the second.

The price to pay for spiritual food is to listen to the Lord

The contrast in this poetry is between the unusual situation of free water, food and wine. All of these normally have a price in the marketplace and the cost of bread, in particular, can climb fairly high. But here the vendor is offering food and drink at no cost for those without money (Heb. *b'lo kesef* = without silver). However, that is not all. The price to pay for spiritual food is to listen to the Lord. The Hebrew uses a familiar expression that adds emphasis to the verb 'listen'. Literally it reads: 'listen, to hear me', in other words, pay attention and listen very carefully; you don't want to miss this:

Listen very carefully to me and you will eat good things and your stomach will enjoy rich food.

Give me your ears and come to me and listen, so that your very inner self may truly live.

And I will establish with you an everlasting relationship marked by the reliable love I gave to David.

Notice the repeated emphasis on listening. The point is, if we truly listen and taken notice then we will put distractions aside and realign our spiritual priorities. The poet drives this home with his commonsense question: 'Why spend your money on what is not bread – on unessentials, and the wages of your labour on what does not give satisfaction?' Why not direct our resources and energy to appreciating others and practising deep respect in all our relationships. This will surely bring inner peace and contentment?

Psalms 144/145 This acrostic song is a psalm of praise for the Presence who is infinite compassion and therefore cannot put off going to the aid of the disadvantaged. Even in famine the psalmist looks forward to better times ahead when the Lord will provide physical and spiritual food. The different tone in this song is that God provides for all creation and there is no tribal attitude implying that God favours Israel in particular to the exclusion of others.

Romans 8:35. 37-39 This is a well-known and often quoted passage of Paul affirming that nothing can come separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. Paul is saying that no forces outside of the individual believer can put a stop to God's love for us. Only individuals by their own decision can turn their back on Christ and disqualify themselves. This is a strong affirmation of relationship with Christ that is nourished by living out the values of Christian love and compassion.

Matthew 14:13-21 Strongly impacted by the death of John, Jesus withdraws to a safe and lonely place to grieve and take stock. We can easily forget the deep respect Jesus had for John who, for a time, was his mentor and inspiration. His discipleship of John led him to recognise his own prophetic calling and discern the direction he would take on his own.

The crowd that came out to listen to Jesus were on the shore of the lake when Jesus and the disciples arrived by boat. He spoke to the and cured their sick and when evening came they were still with him. He declined the disciples' suggestion that they send the people off to buy food in the nearby village and, instead, asked the disciples to rustle up whatever food they had to hand. One little insight we get from this exchange is that, in general, the people were not so destitute that they could not go and buy some food for themselves. The dilemma was that it seemed impossible to feed the crowd with only five loaves and two fish, but Jesus went ahead anyway like a host presiding over a meal and blessed the food. A typical formula of blessing is:

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam, hamotzi lekhem min ha'aretz.

Blessed are you Lord, our God King of the universe who brings forth food from the earth.

Whatever food they had there was distributed to the crowd and they all ate their fill. This event is often called the multiplication of the loaves and fish, but the Scripture account does not say that. It simply says they were all fed. The Master's instruction and the disciples' objection virtually repeat the incident when Elisha told his servant to feed a hundred people with twenty barley loaves and some ears of wheat (2 Kings 4:42-44). How the people were actually fed in both cases we will never know, but the gospel writers carefully avoid saying that there suddenly appeared a pile of bread next to a pile of fish. This would have all the characteristics of magic, and God's power working through Jesus is never portrayed as magic.

With Jesus there will always be an abundance of spiritual food

Did Jesus' blessing of the loaves and fish induce the crowd to bring out and share whatever food they had with them? Who knows? It is fairly certain that in this part of the world and in those days people did not wander outside their villages for a few hours or a day without bringing a snack or something to eat. This communal meal foreshadows and, in some way, represents the Christian Eucharist, which, in the days of the first Christians, was a genuine communal sharing of food and drink done in memory of Christ. In this case there was no wine and the bread and fish were certainly the food of ordinary folk.

The fact that twelve baskets of scraps were collected indicates that some of the people had baskets with them, which, in all likelihood, were the kind of lunch baskets that Jewish workers carried food in. We could well ask why there were baskets among the crowd at all, if not to carry food. Plutarch mentions in his *Table-Talk* that many well-to-do hosts considered it proper to over cater for functions so that there would always be food left over. But all these details aside, the bottom line here is that with Jesus, there will always be an abundance of spiritual food for everyone.

Matthew finishes with a typically Semitic overstatement declaring that there were about five thousand men alone, without counting the women and children who were there. So, numerically, we are up to around eight or nine thousand people – far more people than could have heard Jesus speaking in an open-air setting. Scholars estimate that surrounding towns like Capernaum and Bethsaida might have had a population of 2000-3000 each – making the 8000-9000 listening to Jesus a total exaggeration. Again, the numbers are not the issue. They are overstated to add weight to the enormity of the wonder performed by Jesus and the extent of his abundant generosity.

We can come away from this episode with the thought that all endeavours in life ask us to make do with what we have. The meagre fare that was brought to Jesus was amplified, by whatever means, to provide for the whole assembly. Identifying our gifts and making them work outwardly in the service of others brings fulfilment and satisfaction. It is worth remembering that what we have is enough to contribute positively to the lives of others. The disciples could not see past the few loaves and fish they had, but Jesus brought creativity and imagination to bear and took the dilemma in another direction using the gifts available and the hands of the trusting disciples. We are the hands of Jesus. We are not perfect, but we are enough, and we are capable of producing wonders.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart...do not be wise in your own eyes.

(Proverbs 3:5. 7)



We must seek God in error and forgetfulness and foolishness.

Meister Eckhart (German Dominican theologian and mystic - 1260-1327)

If you have no goals your thoughts will take you toward what you think about most.

Andrew Matthews (Australian inspirational speaker and author)



I love my job. Lately, colleagues have been writing names on the food in the office fridge. I'm currently eating a yoghurt called Susan. How cute!

Laurie Woods