

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 25 July 2021

Scriptures: 2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

Homily: Fr. Ken

This weekend we remember the most famous picnic in religious history, in a way of speaking. How many people were there? Some say 5,000. Did they include women and children? We know for sure that there was at least one child, girl or boy. Nobody knows for sure, but the kid was vital to the story.

This event wins the prize as Scripture's No. 1 picnic. Why? Because the New Testament narrates a version of it six times: twice each in Matthew's and Mark's gospels; once in Luke's gospel; and once in John's gospel. But like every favorite family story, the details vary. This weekend we hear John's rendition.

John presents Jesus as so popular that a huge crowd of people was following him. Indeed, somehow 5,000 people crossed the lake so they could be with him.

While we recognize the sacred character of the Scriptures, we also know that the evangelists were major storytellers deeply immersed in their religious tradition. They honed their gospel narratives long before delivering the final version. These efforts were a necessary part of their collaboration with the Holy Spirit in producing the scriptural texts.

Looking ahead, as we listen to the proclaiming of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel during the upcoming weeks, we need also to remember that this is John's eucharistic narrative. Indeed, John does not talk about bread at the Last Supper; for him, the washing of the feet is the symbol of Jesus' example of self-giving on that night.

John begins this account differently from Mark and the others. He does not portray Jesus teaching the crowds. For John, Jesus' action of nourishing is the first teaching. Explanations follow in the rest of this chapter.

John's story involves a variety of characters. First, Jesus looks at the mass of people. Then he brings Phillip into the action, asking him where they can buy food to feed that crowd. Phillip responds as a pragmatist, not so gently reminding Jesus of the limitations of their funds. Then Andrew enters into the conversation, saying that there is a child who has five barley rolls and two fish. Altogether that adds up to seven items—the number symbolizes completeness, but in this case, it seems more like complete inadequacy.

Now we are at the heart of the story. Just when the disciples have pointed out the absurd limitations of their ability to respond, Jesus has them tell the people to recline in preparation for a feast. While thousands looked on, Jesus took the food and prayed.

John says that Jesus "gave thanks". That implies that he acknowledged that the food he held came from God and belonged to God. Once the kid handed over the food to Jesus, and Jesus gave thanks for it, it was then recognized as God's food, and it was therefore God's goodness that the crowd was going to share.

None of the evangelists describe how the bread multiplied. Whether the sharing of the poorest participant moved the others to open their private stash, or whether it was like manna in the desert that appeared at just the right moment, remains a mystery.

The how of it is not the point John wants to make. The point is that God met the hunger of the people, beginning with the unstinting generosity of one of the least among them, a kid.

And so, we ask: What can this famous story mean for each of us?

Some understand it like the miracle portrayed in the movies when bread shoots out of baskets like popcorn. That interpretation gives God the sole responsibility to do everything.

Many people who have in their own lives come face to face with real poverty, see it in a different way. People who have come to the end of the rope in their own lives and still survive, recognize this story as an example of God's providence. They can tell story after story about how God sent someone at just the right moment: how someone found the money for rent on the morning before the eviction; how a donation came in the day that the orphanage ran out of food; how God comes through again and again, through often unexpected, generous people.

This story is good news because it tells us that God is concerned about people who hunger. It is good news because it reminds us that God can work wonders with the little, we have, if we are willing to give it all. It is good news because it reminds us that with God in our midst, we can always make a banquet out of what seems to be pretty poor fare.

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