

EIGHTEENTH
SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalms 145:8-9, 15-18

The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Reading the Word

Isaiah 55:1-3

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

Romans 8:35, 37-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he

FIRST READING

Isaiah 55:1-3

PSALM

Psalms 145:8-9, 15-18

SECOND READING

Romans 8:35, 37-39

GOSPEL

Matthew 14:13-21

saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

*Scripture quotations from
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Hearing the Word

“Nourishment for the Soul”

The motif of God’s unvarying care and concern for his people occurs frequently in the Scriptures. Today’s readings convey this concern through images of food and sustenance, which carry a deep, spiritual meaning.

The oracle in the first reading comes from a prophet known as the “second Isaiah” whose prophecies, delivered at the very end of the Babylonian exile, convey an ardent anticipation and exuberant joy at the approach of freedom.

The grounds for his joy and confidence lie in God’s decision to make “an everlasting covenant” with the people, a covenant rooted in God’s steadfast and sure love for David. The tragedy of Jerusalem’s fall in 586 BC and the ensuing exile was interpreted by many as a sign that God had withdrawn from the covenant and disowned Israel. Second Isaiah challenges such demoralizing views. He holds that God did not renounce Israel, but that the covenant will be renewed and the nation restored. This renewal will come because God’s election and fidelity to Israel are grounded in his steadfast love for the nation. Speaking to David in the past, God stated that he might afflict David’s descendent with punishment “such as mortals use”, but that God’s steadfast love will never cease (cf. 2 Sam 7:14-15). This closely parallels the situation of the exiles. They have suffered punishment at the hands of their human captors, but God has not deserted them; restoration is certain to

occur after a time of chastisement. The prophet’s certainty of the end of the exile stems from a deep understanding of God’s relationship with Israel, a relationship which includes justice, but is governed by God’s unchangeable and everlasting love.

This perspective allows for a proper interpretation of the oracle. First, the prophet evokes an image of God’s calling on people to partake in freely offered food and drink: water, wine, milk, bread and “rich food”. However, this is no ordinary meal, but is a double invitation to listen and to come to God with an “open ear” in order to live, this replaces the food imagery; the real invitation is to listen and absorb God’s word.

The sense of this exhortation becomes apparent in the light of history. In the past, the Israelites severed their connection with God; closing their ears and stubbornly disobeying his commandments; doing this they brought the disaster of the exile upon themselves. As they are about to get a second chance, Isaiah calls on Israel not to repeat the mistakes of the past, to seek the nourishment of God’s word, so that the covenant may be re-established. He reminds the people that the only viable nourishment that can sustain them can be found in hearing and adhering to God’s commands; on this their existence depends.

Paul concluded the second major part of his letter to the Romans with an exuberant and joyful hymn, contained in the second reading.

The apostle did not employ explicit images of food, but wrote about the sustenance and the protection that come from love. Separation from the source of life, from nourishment, amounts to death. Paul declared that love nourishes and sustains believers, and that they will never be separated from it.

First, Paul focuses on the love of Christ, declaring believers inseparable from it. He lists a number of threatening human factors and forces that could cause separation from Christ. He identifies psychological factors such as fear and distress, hostility and violence; such as persecution and sword, social misfortunes such as famine, nakedness and peril, only to declare them impotent to break believers’ union with Christ. In fact, he states that these perils drive believers closer to Christ, and make them victorious! Paul reasons that since Christ has confronted and has overcome the ultimate evil force – death itself – his faithful will likewise overcome and conquer any evil earthly force with his invincible power.

Next, Paul turns to the love of God. Again, he draws up a list of possible forces, not human but cosmic and supernatural, that could separate believers from God. These include life forces such as death and life, beings such as angels, rulers and powers, time – present and future, and space – height and depth. Thus, Paul declared that nothing that existed, exists or will exist is capable of breaking the union of believers with their God. This is so

because God, the supreme authority over all, loves believers and has made them his own. This was effected by Jesus Christ and cannot be undermined or undone by anything or anyone in existence.

Paul wrote this hymn of the invincibility of God's and Christ's love as means of sustaining believers and nourishing their resolve. He intended the unshakable confidence in the divine love to provide them with spiritual nourishment as they confronted hostile human and superhuman forces in their journey of faith.

The Gospel story of the miraculous feeding of a multitude is set in the desert, a place of want, danger and deprivation. The crowds, drawn to Jesus, venture into this hostile environment leaving the safety of their towns behind. Seeing their devotion, Jesus, moved with compassion, heals those afflicted with illnesses and then provides the crowd with food. A superficial interpretation of Jesus' action would suggest that he was primarily concerned with the people's bodily needs. However, this story hides a far deeper meaning and message.

Looking at the hungry people at dusk, the disciples suggest that Jesus sends them away to buy food in the villages. This suggestion, reasonable as it was, would mean separation from Jesus for the sake of satisfying bodily hunger. Jesus disagrees and commands the disciples to feed the people, which, naturally, they are unable to do with the five loaves and two fish they have. Jesus then takes this ordinary

and utterly insufficient food and performs actions with a profound theological and spiritual significance. First, Jesus raised his eyes to heaven, a sign that his actions will originate with God. Next, he blessed the food, transforming it into an expression of God's nourishing blessing. He then breaks the bread, which signifies his diffusion of God-given nourishment to the multitudes. Finally, he gives the food to the disciples to distribute to all, making them intermediaries in God's provision of nourishment to the people. This deeply symbolic event discloses that Jesus brings God's life-sustaining blessing, true nourishment for life, into the midst of humanity. In the Eucharistic interpretation of the story, Jesus himself is this nourishment; those seeking life must come to him. The story reveals its full meaning in its final lines. First, despite the size of the crowd, "all ate and were filled", which means that Jesus' provision for life is unlimited and complete. He can boundlessly and fully satisfy people's deepest hunger for life. Second, the leftovers gathered amount to twelve baskets. The number twelve stands as a symbol for a complete community. Consequently, Jesus' presence and provision of sustenance established a new community, one that is gathered and sustained by him.

The miraculous feeding of the multitude is nothing other than a symbolic illustration of the inauguration and constitution of the Christian community. This community began with Jesus' coming into the

world and satisfying human hunger for God and life. After his departure, his disciples and successors have an on-going task of "feeding" this community by mediating Jesus' presence, teaching and grace. He himself is the spiritual nourishment for his followers across the ages.

Today's liturgy superbly discloses the many ways in which God sustains his faithful. For Isaiah, the nourishment for souls comes in the form of God's word. For Paul, the divine love of God and Jesus upholds believers in their journey through life. For Matthew, Jesus sustains his followers by his presence, teaching and grace. Those thus nourished will never hunger for a full life, and can only exclaim with the Psalmist, "the eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season."

Listening to the Word of God

The most unlikely place to have a good meal is a desert place where there are no food joints and yet five thousand men, without counting women and children had a real good time in the very place where hunger once stared at their faces. The impossible became possible because of Jesus.

The disciples of Jesus, upon seeing the multitude said to Jesus, "this is a deserted place, and the hour is now late". They saw an emerging problem and proposed a practical human solution which we all could easily agree with – "send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves". Jesus,

however, proposed a divine solution – “bring them, that is the available five loaves and two fish, here to me”. They all ate and were filled and still there was a left-over of twelve baskets full.

There is an African proverb which says, “it is God who drives away flies from the animal who has no tail”. In other words, it is God who takes care of those who do not have in need.

He is the creator of the universe and he knows how to manage his creation. He makes provisions in ways that baffle the human mind. Sometimes, when we are down and deflated, God may choose to send someone to communicate his word to us. At that instant, we feel rejuvenated and a new lease of life is poured into our souls. There are also moments when we are unsure of our next meal but then miraculously, somebody walks into our lives and offers us help – this is God in action.

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand teaches us one big lesson, namely, the Lord is capable of nourishing us wherever and in whichever situation we find ourselves. My inability to solve a seemingly impossible equation does not mean it cannot be solved. There is always a solution to a problem. Yes, there is always a way out of every problematic situation. We sometimes focus too much on the problems of life at the expense of finding a solution to them.

Today, Jesus turns to each one of us and says “bring them here to me”, meaning all those riddles and vicissitudes of life

that appear to us as insurmountable as the feeding of thousands of hungry people in a desert place. What we consider to be impossible would turn out to be doable if only we would trust in the Lord and respond to his invitation. As we place all that we have and are in his hands, we would experience nourishment for our souls.

Proverb

“It is God who drives away flies from the animal who has no tail.”

Action

Self-examination

Do I feel as if I am in a deserted place – a place of lack and emptiness?
Do I long for some form of divine intervention in my present situation?

Am I experiencing some form of inner restlessness? Is my soul desiring to be nourished?

Response to God

I will set aside some days to embark on a retreat. I will ask the Lord to fill my heart with living water that nourishes. I will renew my faith in the Eucharistic meal that the Lord offers me at every Eucharistic table.

Response to your World

How can I provide nourishment for someone whom I know to hunger for a more meaningful and fulfilling life? I will act accordingly.

The Lord nourishes us and sends us to nourish others. We choose to look out for people who are physically hungry and thirsty and see how best we can help them. We also look out for those who are spiritually hungry and thirsty and share the word of God with them.

Prayer

Eternal Father, you are capable of providing for all my needs.

Today, I turn to you with faith and trust. I place all my concerns in your loving hands.

By your power may I find water in the desert to revive my drooping spirit. For the sake of Christ I pray. Amen