

18th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Isaiah 55:1-3 Romans 8:35, 37-39 Matthew 14:13-21

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

The first reading this weekend contains an invitation, addressed to the exiles in Babylon, to come to a banquet at which the food and drink are both free and fully satisfying. The banquet is a metaphor for the new covenant God wants to make with his people (in place of the old one that had been broken by the people's infidelities). The banquet image in this reading is the connection with the Gospel.

The story of the feeding of the multitude in the Gospel today was treasured by the early Christians. It is the only miracle that is contained in all four Gospels. Why was it so treasured? Because it recalled the Old Testament story of God's people being fed by manna in the desert. The early Christians came to regard Jesus as the new Moses who feeds his people in the desert. They also saw in this feeding a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. At the table of the Eucharist Jesus nourished them with something greater than the manna. The manna sustained life temporarily. The food of the Eucharist sustains life eternally.

And it is at the table of the Eucharist that Jesus nourishes us now. Only at God's table can we get the nourishment our hearts are longing for. In the Eucharist we are nourished with the Word of God and the bread of eternal life. As the people went back to their homes at the end of that day they knew they had experienced the goodness and love of God – that love St. Paul talks about, a love from which nothing can separate us. In this lockdown time, we cannot celebrate Eucharist at our churches. I understand that, you are, my parishioners who are hungry of receiving Holy Communion because when you attend Mass online at home, you cannot receive Eucharist like at church, you must receive Communion spiritually. Therefore, you feel that receiving Communion in spirit is not enough. In this time, I would like to share my experience when I have been in St Vincent's hospital. I have really wanted to receive Holy Communion every day during that time. However, one or two day in a week I could not receive Holy Communion because the member of the Pastoral Care Team have not come. These days, I have not felt peaceful in my heart. I have had something been missing in my soul. That feeling has been different from the other days when I have received Holy Communion. Those nights, I have not slept well. In this crisis time, the leaders of the Church advice us that, we can receive Communion in spirit at home when we attending Mass online, however, I think that, you have experience of receiving Communion in spirit at home when you attending Mass online is very different from receiving Holy Communion at Mass in the church is not the same. That's why you are not satisfied and you are hungry of receiving Holy Communion at Mass in the church. That's why we must pray and ask God to stop the pandemic as soon as possible and then we can go to church to celebrate Mass again.

In the Eucharist we taste the love of God. The proof that we have experienced that love will be our willingness to share it with others. It is not so much about giving things. It is more about giving of ourselves, of our time, and our gift. We may be able to give only in small ways and in small amounts. However, from the little boy in the Gospel, we see that a small amount can become a big amount when placed in the hands of the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers, we are in the second lockdown with strict rule of social distancing, restrictions and wearing face mask when going out, therefore, we cannot gather in our churches to celebrate Eucharist. However, the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish provides a chance for me to share a reflection on the Eucharist, on the Mass, the central action of Catholic life because this miracle of Jesus is really a preview of the Mass.

My friends, when we come to Mass, we come to the two tables that make us strong: the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist. At the table of the Word we hear the saving Truth of God read, preached and applied to our life just as Jesus taught the crowds in this weekend's Gospel reading. At the table of the Eucharist, we receive the Risen Christ and a real transfer of Christ's life and strength to us that we call grace. As we draw from these two tables over time, we grow stronger and wiser in the Lord.

The growth of God's life in us through the Eucharist is not like an explosion but like the metabolism of cells or the restoration of tissue which natural foods bring to our bodies. Only later, when we go through a crisis or tragedy are we surprised at the spiritual strength we received from the Lord.

The Mass is a time to hear God's holy Word. Many people have Bibles at home but don't read them. Mass is the only time most people hear God's Word as His teaching comes to their life. Here, God speaks His special Word that each of us needs. In this challenging time, our church are suspended, we cannot to hear the Word of God from at Mass. I suggest that, we should find a new way to hear the Word of God at home by reading Bibles and meditating what you read and try to listen what God wants you to do in this time. The Mass is also the time for Communion. The Eucharist is the closest sacramental encounter with the Risen Christ we are able to have on this earth.

The Mass is a time to be together as Catholics, as the Church, sharing the same Baptism, the same fidelities, the same tradition, professing the same faith. It reminds us that our life is not a private story but part of a large community of faith, part of the story of the Body of Christ in our world. It is a time to offer each other a sign of peace. For a few people that gesture is controversial but it is powerfully symbolic. The person next to us represents all the reconciliations we have yet to achieve in our life. Through this ritual, we obey the Lord's words of seeking to be reconciled before we approach the altar by acknowledging the healing that we all need to bring to our daily life.

All of these and more make up our Mass: our communion with Christ, our instruction in God's Word, strengthening our identity as Catholics, joining our prayers with Jesus' sacrifice of the Cross and a place of peacemaking. All of these are vital for a strong spiritual life. That's why the Mass is at the heart of our Catholicism. It is the North Star of our spiritual life enabling us to see where we are in relation to Christ and the Church and, if lost, it's the way home.

St. Paul writes to the Romans in this weekend's second reading that nothing can separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ. The Mass is the guarantee that the Lord Jesus will let nothing separate us from His love. Can we return that around and honestly say that we will let nothing separate us from Christ in the Eucharist? There are things that can separate us from the love, the strength, the power of Christ and that is our indifference, our departures from Gospel living, our absence from the Sunday Eucharist. The Lord called the people to leave Babylon and promised he would give them food strength for that journey. At each Mass the Lord calls us to follow Him more closely and gives us food and strength for the journey of life that will lead to our promised land with Christ.

In the Gospel today, Jesus fed 5,000 people in the desert. Everyone got as much as they want, and still there were twelve baskets of food left over. It was an astonishing display of compassion and generosity on his part. But he couldn't have done it without the five loaves and two fish given him by a young boy(see Jn 6:9), and without the help of the apostles.

Mother Teresa fed 9,000 people every day in Calcutta. But she couldn't have done so without the generosity of many people around the world, and the assistance of her nuns and lay helpers. Here is an example of the kind of generosity that made this daily miracle possible. Mother Teresa told a story:

One day a young couple came into their house and gave them a large sum of money.

'Where did you get so much money?' Mother Teresa asked.

'We were married two days ago,' they replied. 'We decide not to have a wedding feast, but to give the money to feed the poor instead.'

'Why would you do this?' she asked.

'Because we love each other and wanted to begin our married life with an act of sacrifice,' they replied.

What made their act of generosity all the more amazing was the fact that both of them were high-caste Hindus, who normally will have nothing to do with the poor. Sometimes a small deed takes on an importance far beyond its actual value. When Jesus told the apostles to give food to the people, they said, 'All we have with us is five loaves and two fish.' On hearing this Jesus might have said, 'That's no good. Forget the whole thing. Send the people home.' But he said no such thing. Instead, he took the five loaves and two fish, and with them fed the people.

Feeding hungry bodies is one of the corporal works of mercy. It is something we could and should be able to do for ourselves. But there is a food that only God can give. Jesus was concerned about those who were hungry. However, he didn't just feed people's bodies; he nourished their minds, their heart, and their spirits. The people Jesus fed in that lonely place that day went home fully nourished, in body and in spirit.

As we share Eucharist, we are sharing in the Last Supper that Jesus longed to share with his disciples. Jesus is still sharing with us each time we celebrate the Eucharist, giving us strength for our journey, just as he gave food to the people in the desert to help sustain them for their journey. No matter how difficult our lives may become, we still have a compassionate friendship with the loving and compassionate Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Dear sisters and brothers, with the five loaves and two fish that Jesus had blessed, the disciples fed a vast crowd. Our acts of service and love towards others many often seem small but, blessed by Jesus, they too can have a great impact. We need Jesus to bless our work, and Jesus needs us to feed the hungry and comfort the lonely of our world. Together, we can do great things. Remember that, God loves us, not because we are good, but because he is good. We are his children. That is reason enough for God to love us. Due to pandemic crisis, we cannot celebrate Eucharist at our churches, we must celebrate Mass online at home, however, we can receive Communion in spirit. Staying at home to celebrate Mass online, we pray for each other to be peaceful and safety in this challenging time and overcome all difficulties in this rocky time. In responding the invitation of Jesus,

“Give them something to eat yourselves,” let us try our best to do a specific action to help the poor and the needy in our community. Amen.

Take care and stay safely at home!

May Almighty God bless you and your family.

Fr Tao Pham