

June 23, 2019

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Luke 9:11b-17

Jesus spoke to the crowds of the reign of God, and he healed all who needed to be cured. As day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, “Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here.” He answered them, “Give them some food yourselves.” They replied, “Five loaves and two fishes are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people?” Now the men there numbered about five thousand. Jesus said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty.” They did so and made them all sit down. Then, taking the five loaves and the two fishes, Jesus raised his eyes to heaven, pronounced a blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to his disciples set before the crowd. They all ate until they were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.

Background:

Luke describes this event as taking place in Bethsaida, a familiar place to Jesus and the disciples. It is a fishing village on the northeastern shore of Galilee, and it was the home of Philip, Andrew and Peter. Jesus had cured a blind man there (Mark 8:22-26). Jesus is reported to have complained that the people of Bethsaida, as well as those of Chorazin, were slow to repent. (Matthew 11:21) These people would have been familiar with Jesus and his ministry. This may explain the crowds that gathered to hear Jesus speak about the Kingdom of God. If familiarity with Jesus did not draw the crowd, reports that he was “healing those who needed to be cured” would have. As the day nears its end and the time for the main meal of the day approaches, the twelve (with just five loaves and two fish) suggest that Jesus send the crowd away so people can get provisions and secure lodging.

This gospel text has many levels of significance for Luke’s community. They would be familiar with the stories from the Hebrew scripture where God had acted to feed their ancestors. Most important would be the feeding with quail and manna during their time in the desert (Exodus 16:4-35). A story less familiar to the contemporary Christian is that of Elisha, a prophet, who was able to feed 100 people with 20 barley loaves.

“A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing the man of God twenty barley loaves made from the first-fruits, and fresh grain in the ear. Elisha said, ‘Give it to the people to eat.’ But his servant objected, ‘How can I set this before a hundred men?’ Elisha insisted, ‘Give it to the people to eat, for thus says the Lord, They shall eat and there shall be some left over.’ And when they had eaten, there was some left over, as the Lord had said.” (2Kings 4:42-44)

With this background, Luke’s community would understand that Jesus was doing for them what God had done for their ancestors.

On yet another level, Luke has chosen to tell this story using language that would remind the community of their Eucharistic banquet. The sequence of the verbs in this text: “taking the loaves,” “said the blessing,” “broke them,” and “gave them to the disciples” (Luke 9:16) is identical to the text used by Luke at the Last Supper. “Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘this is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.’” (Luke 22:19) This language would remind the people of the Last Supper, the Eucharistic banquet, and the final banquet when the Kingdom of God is restored. This last notion is enhanced by the fact that Luke reports that “all were satisfied.” In fact, the context for this story is that Jesus was speaking about the Kingdom of God and healing those who were in need. (Luke 9:12)

Reflection Questions:

1. My memories of family meals make me aware...
2. My awareness of being hungry...
3. My awareness of meals and banquets in scripture includes...
4. When I place myself among this crowd having come to be with Jesus at the end of the day in a deserted place without provisions...
5. If you think of a gathering of five thousand in the countryside, hoping to be healed and to hear a religious teacher, what kind of people would you expect to find among the group?

6. Given Jesus' complaint about the people of Bethsaida in Matthew 11:22, the fact that Jesus takes the time to spend a full day in their midst and work this miracle suggests to me...
7. Given the size of the crowd and the role of the apostles in the events as recorded here, this speaks to me of...
8. Can you take some time now to talk with God about what this gospel text says to you about the Eucharist, God's desire for us to be filled until we are satisfied, or your own sense of only having "five loaves and two fish?"

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for June 23, 2019, The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

In those days, Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine, and being a priest of God Most High, he blessed Abram with these words:
"Blessed be Abram by God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand."
Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.
The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool."
The scepter of your power the Lord will stretch forth from Zion: "Rule in the midst of your enemies."
"Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendor;
before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you."

Brothers and sisters: I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,
that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and,
after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you.
Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying,
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

Jesus spoke to the crowds about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured.
As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, "Dismiss the crowd
so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions;
for we are in a deserted place here." He said to them, "Give them some food yourselves."
They replied, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food
for all these people." Now the men there numbered about five thousand.

Then he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty."
They did so and made them all sit down. Then taking the five loaves and the two fish,
and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them,
and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. They all ate and were satisfied.
And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.

Excerpts from Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:1-4; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; and Luke 9:11-17