

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

Today we continue with this series explaining the Mass moving into the second part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Which coincides very nicely with our readings, because this week our Gospel readings begin a 5-week series of what is called Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse. So we move from hearing from the Gospel of Mark to a five-week interlude from the Gospel of John. But although we switch from Mark to John, our Gospel reading today continues on from where last week's Gospel reading left off.

Last week we heard how a large crowd followed Jesus and his apostles, and when Jesus saw them, he took pity on them, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." And so he begins to teach them "many things." And in today's Gospel, we hear how Jesus then feeds the crowd by performing one of his greatest miracles, the multiplication of the loaves and the fish. So, after feeding the

people with the word of his teachings, he also feeds them physically. But, as we will learn, this physical feeding also has a spiritual nature.

And, as usual, there is a connection between our first reading and our Gospel. The connection is very obvious: Elisha is given twenty loaves of barley and with it is somehow able to feed one hundred of his disciples. Elisha was considered the greatest miracle-worker of the monarchy period of Israel's history, which lasted for many centuries. And this was certainly one of his biggest miracles. But then in our Gospel reading, we hear how Jesus surpasses this great miracle many times over: he takes just 5 loaves and 2 fish and multiplies them to feed a crowd of well over 5000. And not only has Jesus fed this huge crowd, there are 12 baskets of leftovers, one basket for each of his 12 apostles who collected them – there are more leftovers than there was food to start with!

And there is also a connection between the feeding of the 5,000 and the upcoming Last Supper which Jesus will not long after share with his 12 apostles. There is a connection in the words that are used and the actions that Jesus takes. First, Elisha's miracle and the feeding of the 5,000 take place near the feast of Passover. The Gospel reading states this explicitly, but the 1<sup>st</sup> reading does not; the clue there is that a man brought Elisha 20 barley loaves which were the "first fruits" – in other words, the barley harvest had just recently taken place and the man was giving Elisha the first part of his harvest – and the beginning of the barley harvest took place around Passover. And likewise, the Last Supper takes place at Passover.

Jesus instructs the people to recline – just as Jesus and his apostles reclined around the table at the Last Supper, the only other time in John's Gospel in which that verb is used. Then, he takes the bread, gives thanks, and then gives it to the people. Afterwards, the

Gospel there are 12 baskets of fragments left over. The Greek word for “fragments” literally translates as “breakings” – broken pieces of bread.

There are four accounts in the New Testament of how Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper – in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians – and they all use the same formula: Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks the bread, and then gives it to his apostles. So there is a very strong connection in the language used in John’s account of the multiplication of the loaves / the feeding of the five thousand with the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

And in the Mass, the priest performs this same action when he takes the bread, gives thanks to the Lord, breaks it, and then gives it to the people. The Catholic Church sees the Last Supper as the first

Eucharist, the first Mass, in which Jesus gives His Body and Blood to us as our spiritual food and drink. In the upcoming weeks, we will continue to hear from John's Gospel in which Jesus explains that he is giving his flesh and blood as food and drink to his followers, which will scandalize many. But this has been the constant teaching of the Church since the time of Christ. Not that the Eucharist is a symbol, but that it is in fact Jesus' Body and Blood. I'd like to quote from a letter written around the year 150 A.D. by one of the early Church fathers, St. Justin Martyr, in which he gives one of the earliest known descriptions of Christian worship:

*And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles [i.e., the Gospels] or the writings of the prophets [i.e., the Old Testament] are read...then...the president [presider] verbally instructs, and exhorts the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and...when our prayer is ended, bread and*

*wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings...and the people assent, saying, "Amen"; and there is a distribution to reach, and a partaking of the eucharisted things, and to those who are absent [the sick and the elderly] a portion is sent by the deacons.*

I hope this sounds at least a little familiar, because this is the basic structure of our Mass.

St. Justin Martyr wrote this 50-60 years after the death of John, the last of the apostles. At every Mass, we are carrying out the same liturgy begun by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper and then continued first by his apostles and then by the priests they ordained in the first decades of the Church, and so on down through the centuries to the present day. Yes, there have been changes, adaptations, and additions here and there, but the structure remains the same.

And so after our readings from Scripture and the homily and the profession of the Creed, the congregation brings our petitions to the Lord through what are called the Intercessions or the Prayers of the Faithful. Then everyone is seated for the offertory, in which members of the congregation bring forward the gifts of bread and wine, and a collection is taken up to support the needs of the parish and the community. As with so much else in the Mass, there is also a symbolic aspect to this: we are offering not only bread, wine, and a portion of our material resources, we are also meant to offer ourselves in a spiritual sense to the Lord in this moment. We are giving ourselves to the Lord so that He might transform us more and more into His own image and likeness.

When the priest receives the gifts of bread and wine, he says a prayer of blessing over them. Usually at a Sunday Mass, he says these prayers inaudibly, because the congregation is singing a hymn, but if there is no hymn, such as at a daily Mass, he says them out

loud. These prayers have been adapted from the Passover meals of the Jews of Christ's time and are known as *berakah* – or blessing – prayers. First, when he takes the bread, he says, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you...”, etc. And the congregation responds, “Blessed be God forever.” And then he takes the wine and says a similar prayer of blessing: “Blessed are you, Lord God, of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you....”, etc.

Then he pours a drop of water into the chalice of wine, while praying quietly, “Through the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” This mixing of water with the wine probably had a very practical origin – making a dense wine more drinkable – but quickly took on a symbolic meaning: “the restoration of human nature (symbolized by the water) by its union

with the divine nature (symbolized by the wine)” in Christ. The mixture of the water and wine also signifies the blood and water that flowed out from the side of Christ when he died on the Cross.

Then the priest says another prayer inaudibly while bowing to the altar – it is a “prayer of humility and surrender” – “With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God.” And then he washes his hands while praying quietly these words: “Wash me O Lord from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” With these prayers and actions, the priest is acknowledging his sinfulness and thus his unworthiness to offer this most sacred sacrifice to the Lord. The washing of the hands again most likely had a very practical origin – the priest’s hands were probably a little dirty – this was of course before there was soap and water everywhere – but it took on a symbolic significance of spiritual cleansing of his own sins.

With these prayers and actions, the priest and the people are spiritually preparing themselves to enter into the most sacred part of the Mass. Spiritual preparation is necessary, both for our own personal prayer and for collective prayer such as the Mass. And this preparation can and should take place all the time really – through the way we live our lives outside of our prayer time and outside of the Mass will make a difference not only in how we experience them but also in the fruits they bear in us. If we lead very chaotic, noisy, self-centered lives, if we are constantly focused on our own needs and wants and how to satisfy them, not paying much attention to others', then praying and going to Mass may very well not produce much fruit in us. That is not to say that we should give up doing these things; rather, that we need to take an active role in our spiritual lives and not expect prayer, receiving communion, and so on to act like magic in us. Jesus works with us and with what we give to Him; if we give Him little, He has less to work with. He can

certainly multiply the little bit we give him and make it much greater than it was, but He will not take what we do not give Him. So it is vital that we always strive to be more intentional about what we are doing with our lives in general, intentional with our prayer lives and when we come to Mass. It is good to reflect on the disposition of our own heart when we pray and when we come to Mass and to turn off the auto-pilot mode it is so easy to go into.

Jesus can and will transform us more and more as long as we let him. Let us continue to open our hearts to receive Him in the Eucharist and to receive the many gifts He desires to give us.

- **July 28, 2024 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**