

28 July 2024 – 17th Sunday (Year B)

28 July 2024 – 17th Sunday (Year B)

World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly (see prayer at bottom of page)

(1) 2 Kings 4:42-44

Elisha provides food for a hundred men

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” So he repeated, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’” He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

Responsorial: from Psalm 145

R./: The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs

Let all your works give you thanks, O Lord,
and let your faithful ones bless you.
Let them discourse of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might. (R./)

The eyes of all look hopefully to you,
and you give them their food in due season;
you open your hand
and satisfy the desire of every living thing. (R./)

The Lord is just in all his ways
and holy in all his works.
The Lord is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth. (R./)

(2) Ephesians 4:1-6

From prison, St. Paul invites us to live a life of peace and harmony

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Gospel: John 6:1-15

Jesus feeds the people with a boy's loaves and fishes

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.



Loaves and Fishes

We can sometimes find ourselves in situations beyond our abilities to cope, when the gap between the resources at our disposal and the issue to be dealt with seems too great. We feel a sense of helplessness which drains us of the energy to tackle the problem. The challenge seems simply too great to be faced. In this gospel we have an example of that kind of apparent powerlessness. Jesus and the disciples are faced with a very large crowd of hungry people in a deserted place. They need to be fed and the resources to feed them don't appear to be there. The sense of being overwhelmed by the task that needs doing is audible in the comments that Jesus' disciples make. Philip states, 'Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them a small piece each.' Andrew comments that there is a small boy present with five barley loaves and two fish, but he asks rather despairingly, 'What is that between so many?' I am sure that people who work for aid agencies like Trocaire, Concern, Goal and Gorta often found themselves in a similar situation in those parts of the world ravaged by conflict and famine. The huge need outstrips the available resources. Yet, in that situation such workers always do whatever they can with whatever resources they have at their disposal. They don't despair; they tackle the situation as best as they can.

Jesus was just as aware as his disciples of the enormity of the task and the apparent lack of resources. However, he did not share

their sense of defeatism. He saw that in some way the small boy with the five barley loaves and two fish was the key to feeding the vast crowd. We cannot be certain what exactly happened on that day in the wilderness but it seems certain that the small boy with his few barley loaves and fish played a very important role. There was only enough food there for a simple meal for a poor family. Yet, he was willing to part with his barley loaves and fish; he handed them over to Jesus and, in some mysterious way, Jesus was able to work with the young boy's generous gift to feed everyone. One generous boy was the beginning of the feeding of the multitude. The boy's generosity gave Jesus the opening that he needed. In and through this small boy's simple gift, Jesus worked powerfully.

This is one of the very few stories about Jesus that is to be found in all four gospels. It clearly spoke very powerfully to the early church. Perhaps in and through this story the early believers came to appreciate that the Lord can use our tiniest efforts to perform his greatest works. As Paul declared in his letter to the church in Corinth that God's power is often made perfect in our weakness. The Lord can work powerfully in and through the very little that we possess, if we are generous with that little. The small boy is our teacher in that regard. He gave over his few barley loaves and fish, and the Lord did the rest. So often the spontaneous generosity of children can have a great deal to teach us. In giving away the little we have we leave ourselves very vulnerable. Yet, the gospel suggests that the Lord can work powerfully in and through that very vulnerability which is the fruit of our generosity. The Lord needs us to be generous with what we have, even though it can seem very small and very inadequate in our eyes. The Lord does not work in a vacuum; he needs us to create an opening for him to work. Without the presence of Jesus, the crowd would not have

been fed. Without the presence of the small boy and his few resources the crowd would not have been fed either. The Lord needs us to be generous with what we have today if he is to continue to feed the various hungers of today's crowd, whether it is the basic hunger for food, or the hunger for shelter, for a home, for friendship, for community, for acceptance or the deeper spiritual hunger for God. The gospel teaches us never to underestimate the significance of even the tiniest efforts we make to be generous with the resources we have at our disposal, whether it is resources of money, or time or some ability or other.

All four evangelists saw a connection between what happened in the wilderness on that day and what happened at the Last Supper and what happens at every Eucharist. Just as Jesus transformed the small boy's simple gifts of five barley loaves and two fish into a feast for thousands, so he transforms our simple gifts of bread and wine into a spiritual feast for all, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. The way the Lord works in the Eucharist is how he works in the rest of our lives. He takes the little we offer to him and by means of it, in the words of Saint Paul, he is 'able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.'
[Martin Hogan]

Feeding the Hungry

Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings tell of the feeding of hungry people. Elijah's miracle, for the poor widow, came towards the end of a long drought when famine raged in the land of Israel, and the kindly action of a well-wisher enabled the prophet to feed

his hungry community.

We are all too familiar from television with the obscenity of people dying of starvation in an affluent world for whom there has been no miraculous feeding. Sometimes, by contrast, we have known joyful moments of humane solidarity, when music and celebration aroused the hope that we could “Feed the World.” On days like that, the little we gave seemed as important as the loaves and fishes. When people share food and resources with strangers, barriers are broken down. They recognize their dependence on one another.

But just as soon as one crisis of starvation has been relieved, another seems to arise. People in the poorest countries still struggle, just to survive. It is easy to feel powerless in the face of the sheer impossibility of feeding the world, to allow the first symptoms of “compassion fatigue” as the aid agencies call it, to give way to numbed indifference. Like Elijah’s servant or Andrew, we ask, “How can we feed so many, with so little?”

It would horrify the humane voters in democratic lands if our leaders and planners openly admitted how the economic logic which sustains our way of life dictates that the most powerless are destined to go hungry for ever. But our developed world makes tough trade agreements, creates food mountains and milk-lakes, and diverts financial and human resources into the arms trade rather than into development and education. Even if our leaders and planners are sensible, humane people, they are—like ourselves—caught in the web of unjust expectations which is part of what we mean by “the sin of the world.”

Mahatma Gandhi said once, “To the poor man, God does not

appear except in the form of bread and in the promise of work.” The Eucharist renews the deepest springs of our humanity by a story of bread broken and eaten for the life of the world. Can we help those who celebrate the Eucharist with us this Sunday to see a link between it and the hunger of the world? Has the parish some project to support a missionary helping in the developing world, or can some local people to be enlisted in telling the story of such a project? “Gather up the fragments so that nothing gets wasted.” Global solutions lie beyond the power of our local parish, which is why we need to remember the lesson of the fragments. If we can put a little new heart into our efforts, that will be something worthwhile. If we can become conscious of our wastefulness of world resources, it may be the beginning of repentance.

A life worthy of our vocation

Today’s homily could focus on the ideals proposed in the second reading, showing the true Christian character according to Paul, prisoner for Christ.

1. Freedom is as much “for” as “from”: Personal freedom is something we rightly treasure. As a vital part in the pursuit of happiness, it is increasingly taken for granted, at least in our developed countries, as a basic human right. We resent any excessive and unwarranted intrusions on our liberty, whether by our neighbours, or by officials such as police, bureaucrats, revenue collectors, or even by the leaders of our Church. We want to be free to do as we please with our lives, our energy and our income.

This is a good desire, on just one condition, that what we desire is itself good. It's not enough to be free from pressures and interference. Freedom must also be *for something*. It is not complete until we put it to work, using it for something worthwhile.

2. A Christian should be positive. We all know some people who seem to have an unusual level of freedom and initiative, in deciding what to do with their energy and their time. They get things done, while others would still be anxiously fretting and wondering whether to do anything! Paul of Tarsus was a great "Doer," a man who believed in his mission in life, which was to share Christ with as many people as possible. Among the apostles, he was the supreme activist, spreading the Gospel "in season and out of season." While the conservative Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem worried about what conditions would need to be imposed before letting Greek converts into the Church, Paul was already out on his mission-field, winning those Greeks for Christ. What made Paul so sure that his way was right? He was deeply convinced that it was God's way, that his vocation came to him direct from the living God.

3. Each one has a personal vocation. He wrote this letter not just to the leaders, nor even to the whole community in Ephesus, but to every one of his converts. It is meant as an "encyclical," a final word for all his mission parishes. And his message holds good today, for each adult Christian who is willing to listen to God's call. The whole basis for our faith, says Paul, is that the good God has blessed us, and made us his children by grace: there is one God, the Father of us all. He is the God of mercy, who "opens wide his hand" to bless, and is "loving in all his deeds." Once we realise this, we also understand how much is asked of us in response. We

need to love others as God loves them, “with unselfishness, gentleness and patience.” This is the truly “good” life, the proper life-style for a Christian. Of course, such perfect love and unity with others is not an easy vocation, and indeed is never quite within our power to achieve. Still, it is there as a guiding ideal, calling us onward and upward. Any worth-while vocation is like that; it calls us beyond ourselves.

4. The importance of making a Start. All too often, our response to such high idealism is to shrug and say, “Be realistic! Don’t expect much from me! I’m no hero, just an ordinary person.” Paul would not let us cop out of the love ideal so easily. With a nice sense of balance, he advises, “do what you can to achieve and preserve it.” The problem often lies in getting started. What you or I can actually do, here and now, to help our neighbours, may seem woefully small. But it’s all that’s required of us just at this point in time. Elisha’s servant felt that his twenty small loaves were nowhere near enough to feed a hundred hungry men. Still, once distributed, those loaves made all the difference.

5. Cooperating with Christ. The Christian vocation to love others, whether it comes to us as married or as single, as lay-person, religious or priest, is always part of our personal relationship with Our Lord. It is only fulfilled in co-operation with him. Each of us can be like those disciples, who took the bread that Jesus blessed, and then distributed it to the crowds. Some of us, like Philip, may feel reluctant at first to get involved in a problem that looks too big to solve. Others, like Andrew, are a bit more optimistic, and begin to notice whatever glimmerings of hope are there in the situation. But if Jesus has the willing co-operation of all his friends, something great will be done for the people in need.

We just need to open our eyes, to see the needs around us. Problems to be faced; people to be loved, respected and listened to. To be involved in helping others, with our talents, our energy and our love, is the best and proper use of our freedom. And it will, please God, add up to “a life worthy of our vocation.”

Pope Benedict XVI's Prayer for Grandparents

Written at the request of the Catholic Grandparents Association in 2008.

| Pope's prayer

Lord Jesus,
you were born of the Virgin Mary,
the daughter of Saints Joachim and Anne.
Look with love on grandparents the world over.
Protect them! They are a source of enrichment
for families, for the Church and for all of society.
Support them! As they grow older,
may they continue to be for their families
strong pillars of Gospel faith,
guardians of noble domestic ideals,
living treasuries of sound religious traditions.
Make them teachers of wisdom and courage,
that they may pass on to future generations the fruits
of their mature human and spiritual experience.

Lord Jesus,

help families and society
to value the presence and role of grandparents.
May they never be ignored or excluded,
but always encounter respect and love.
Help them to live serenely and to feel welcomed
in all the years of life which you give them.
Mary, Mother of all the living,
keep grandparents constantly in your care,
accompany them on their earthly pilgrimage,
and by your prayers, grant that all families
may one day be reunited in our heavenly homeland,
where you await all humanity
for the great embrace of life without end. Amen!