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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 6, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

This third part of our instruction from sacred scripture continues our reading of the holy gospel according to John. You remember last week, the people were gathered together in a deserted place and after a long day of teaching, they were tired and hungry. The disciples were going to send them away, but then Jesus kept them and found a way that all of them were nourished and fed. After that, they wanted to make him king, so he went away and hid. The disciples crossed the lake in a boat and then John picks up the incident from there.

The next day, the people who had stayed on the other side realized that only one boat had been there and Jesus had not entered the boat. Rather, the disciples had gone away alone. Now bigger boats from Tiberius came near the place where all these people had eaten the bread, and when the people saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum, looking for Jesus.

Today's Readings
Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15
Psalm 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54
Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
John 6:24-35
Full text of the readings [1]

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, ?Master, when did you come here?? Jesus answered, ?Truly, I say to you, you look for me, not because you have seen the signs, but because you ate bread and were satisfied. Work then, not for perishable bread, but for the lasting food which gives eternal life. This is the food that the Son of Man gives to you, for God?s seal has been put on him.?

Then the Jews asked Jesus, ?What shall we do? What are the works that God wants us to do?? Jesus answered them, ?The work God wants is this, that you believe in the one whom God sent.? They then said, ?Well, show us some miraculous signs that we may see and believe you. What sign do you perform? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as the scripture tells us, ?they were given bread from heaven to eat.?

Jesus then said to them, ?Truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but God gives you the true bread from heaven. The bread God gives is the One who comes from heaven and gives life to the world.? And they said to him, ?Give us this bread always.? Jesus said to them, ?I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty. Nevertheless as I said, you refused to believe, even when you have seen, yet all that God gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I shall not turn away; for I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of the one who sent me.?? And this, my brothers and sisters, is the gospel of the Lord.

In order to enter deeply into the word of God today and to understand how it can enter into our lives, I think it?s important to not just listen to the lessons today, but to remind ourselves of that passage from last Sunday. That was a very important part of the gospel. You can tell this because it?s actually recorded -- that event in the desert, whatever exactly happened there -- six times in the gospels, twice in Matthew and Mark, once in Luke, and once in John.

So obviously, the first disciples who put the gospels together felt that that was a truly profound event and very

important for our spiritual development. If you just remind yourself, last Sunday, out of that desert place, those thousands, over 5,000 men, women and children, gathered together and at the end of a long day, Jesus had been teaching them, they were tired and hungry, and the disciples said, ?Send them away. Let them take care of themselves.?

But Jesus, as a person of such deep compassion, could never do that. Compassion is one of the first things we learn about Jesus. Especially in an event like this, he enters into the pain, the suffering, the hurt of people, so Jesus would not send them away. Then we learn how there?s a youngster with five loaves and two fish. The disciples say, ?That?s not enough,? but Jesus said, ?Don?t worry, somehow God will provide,? so they all sit down and they manage to eat, everyone, more than enough, 12 baskets full of leftovers.

All of this teaches us how important it is to share the resources that God has given for all, not just for a few in the world, how important it is to share with one another, how important it is to trust that God always provides and how important it is to not waste the resources God has given to us. Jesus carefully instructs that the leftovers be picked up and kept for later, so carefully guarding what God has given to us.

There are so many things we can learn, and that?s why it?s recorded six times, but also why, in John?s gospel, as we hear today, Jesus begins to reflect openly and publicly on what all of this means. So we have, in John?s gospel, a long discourse now, which we call the teaching of Jesus on the bread of life. Maybe the first thing we should notice about how Jesus teaches us is the way that this is recorded in the gospel.

In John?s gospel, what happened there in the desert was really John?s description of Jesus establishing what we call the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament. In John?s gospel, when you go to the last part of the gospel, the final week of the life of Jesus, there is a last supper, but nothing as the Last Supper describing Jesus taking the bread and wine and making it his body and blood, but here it is in John?s gospel: ?Jesus then took the bread, looked up to heaven, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples,? the very words that the other gospel writers use at the Last Supper.

So for John, this event in the desert was when Jesus established the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament. The other gospel writers, when they describe the Blessed Sacrament, they describe it in terms that make us realize that the Blessed Sacrament is something active. Jesus took the bread, blessed it and broke it and said, ?This is my body, given for you out of love. This is the cup of my blood, poured forth for you.? That?s the emphasis in the other gospels.

But Jesus gives us the Holy Eucharist, shares his very life with us under the forms of bread and wine, so that we can give ourselves to others, share our very lives with others. In St. Paul, where he describes the institution of the Holy Eucharist in the letter to the church at Corinth, he puts emphasis on the Blessed Sacrament as being the way that all of us find Jesus in each other, because Paul puts it in the context of a meal, where some people have more than they need and are selfish toward others and exclude others.

Paul says you can?t do that when you?re celebrating the Eucharist because if you do, you?re pushing away Jesus because at the Eucharist, Jesus lives in all of us and we find Jesus in one another. That?s a very important aspect of the Eucharist, but now in John?s gospel, what Jesus is teaching us about the Eucharist is something that perhaps we let go of a little bit, that truly, as Jesus says when he?s teaching the people today, ?I am the bread of life. When you see this bread, it is I, Jesus; this cup of wine, I am really present there. Whoever eats this bread shall never be hungry. Whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty.?

See, the emphasis in John?s gospel is on the real presence of Jesus, that when we look at that bread raised up before us, that is Jesus. He?s truly present under the form of bread, and when we raise up the cup, it?s Jesus under the form of wine. We must never forget that. We must always make sure that we have deep reverence and respect for the bread and the wine that have become the body and blood of Jesus.

As we do deepen our faith that Jesus is really present under the form of bread and wine, we might ask ourselves the same question that the crowd asked Jesus: ?What are we to do?? Jesus tells them, ?The work God wants is this, that you believe in the one whom God has sent.? So our work at this Eucharist today is to really stir up within ourselves faith, truly to believe that Jesus is present in our midst, in this word of God, in one another, but truly under those forms of bread and wine.

And when we come forward to receive communion, we see beyond the bread, beyond the cup; we see Jesus. If we can do that, then perhaps what St. Paul asks of us in our second lesson today will happen. He wants us, as he says, ?You must give up your former way of living, the old self. Renew yourself spiritually from inside and put on the new person, the new self, according to God, a new self created in true righteousness and holiness.?

So as we believe, we open ourselves to that revolution within us, turn around totally so that we follow faithfully everything that Jesus teaches us and what he shows us, and that we live from now on according to his way of love.

[This homily was given at St. Leo?s Church in Detroit, Michigan.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/080209.shtml