

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”    17<sup>TH</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
2 Kings 4: 42-44   Psalm 145   Ephesians 4: 1-6   John 6: 1-15

Dear Preachers:

Remember Elisha? He was a disciple of the great prophet Elijah. Before God took Elijah off in the fiery chariot, Elijah asked Elisha what he would want from him. Elisha asked, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit." The gift was given to Elisha and to symbolize it, as Elijah was being taken up, his mantle fell on Elisha. Elisha was to continue the work of his mentor. His deeds include multiplying the oil for a widow's support; enabling a barren woman to conceive; raising a dead child and, in today's reading, multiplying bread. (Obviously the miracle of bread was chosen to go with the Gospel tale of multiplication.) Both prophets' miracles reveal God acting in characteristic fashion by responding to people's needs.

Elisha has heard the call of God to be a prophet and has asked to follow and be like a specific prophet--- Elijah. Elijah's prophecy had some characteristic signs: he opposed the worship of false gods (Baal) and objected to the oppressive system supported by this false worship in a corrupt hierarchical priestly system. Elisha followed this prophetic pattern and even exceeded the works of his predecessor. In today's multiplication story he shows the work of a true prophet of God, he feeds the people's hungers. In many ways Elisha took the side of the poor of the land and backed a social system that would protect their rights. Elisha's miracles were for the common people in their time of need.

Before we look at today's gospel, I think we would do well to have an overview of the upcoming weeks, because we are beginning a sequence of gospel passages from John 6—the exception being for the feast of the Transfiguration (August 6). Chapter 6 is a literary unit unto itself. It focuses on Jesus' feeding the crowd with bread and on the discourse that follows that feeding. Since today's gospel is the first passage in the sequence, the preacher would do well to pause and get an overview of the entire chapter. Here is a chance to plan a sequence of preachings from chapter 6, so it would do well to plan ahead and do some extra reflection and study on the entire chapter. The sequence goes as follows: the feeding with bread (6: 1-15—today's reading); Jesus' walking on water (6: 15-24—skipped because of the Transfiguration); the discourse on bread from heaven (6: 25-34), Jesus the bread of life (6: 35-51—19th. Sunday); the bread and flesh controversy (6: 51-58—20th. Sunday); and the effects of the discourse on Jesus' followers (6: 60-

69—21st Sunday).

Let's look at today's passage, the multiplication of the loaves. Though Jesus' miracle is similar to that of Elisha, it is even grander. If Jesus performs a miracle similar to this prophet of true worship and concern for the rights of the poor, then Jesus' miracle is a sign that he is a descendent of the prophetic spirit of Elisha (and Elijah) and stands for the same things. Even their names are similar--Elisha means "God has saved"; Jesus means, "The one who saves".

We know that this is one of those gospel stories that appears in all four Gospels; Matthew even tells it twice. The stories all have common elements, i.e. Jesus began with a few loaves and a few fish and fed thousands of people. In John's account, the stress is on the bread, the few dried fish seem minimal. He is calling our attention to the bread. In both the first and this reading, it is barley bread that is multiplied. Barley was the food of the poor, thus the bread shared comes from the poor. It was the poor who gathered before Jesus and were fed. From the midst of the poor and with their own meager resources, the poor are fed amply. There is no minimized or slashed monthly welfare check here for the poor, they are given more than enough to eat.

We celebrate in this liturgy today a God who sees the people's hungers. In the line of the prophetic tradition, we are again called to worship the one true God, the God who sees the struggles and the longings of the poor. God is definitely revealed in this miracle as wanting to feed their/our hungers. There is no other god, and any other than this God is a false god.

It's what the prophets taught, and it is what Jesus' sign reveals to the crowds. In the light of this revelation of the one, true God: for what bread do we hunger?...the bread of fidelity?...the bread of simplicity?...the bread of justice...? the bread of gratitude? Jesus has bread for us.

The Gospel story ends with the people wanting to make Jesus a king--he flees. He is fleeing earthly power and perhaps underscoring the reality that power can corrupt. The crowd is fed, but it misses the true meaning of what just happened. They do not see where the food really comes from, they are awed by the miracle and Jesus does not trust their motives. Notice what Jesus did in the story, he "gave thanks." He knows the source of this food; he knows the source of the food that really can nourish us.

Once again in John's Gospel, the crowd misses the sign of a generous God in their midst. They could be filled in more ways than physical sating. God would offer them much more. Jesus gives instructions to his disciples, "Get the people to recline." At the meal God provides, they will eat as if feasting. (This is another example of John's use of banquet imagery.) The meal has no categories or rankings in it; no privileged people getting the choice morsels, all eat the same food, all are equals at this feast; no preliminary questions or barriers are proposed-- the only qualification to eat is one's hunger. The disciples don't even get to eat first; they are the servants following instructions. If they do get to eat, it is as part of the crowd---a cause for any contemporary minister's examination of conscience! All are feasting and in this meal, one senses what it will be like when the reign of God comes in its fulness.

The passage begins with a seeming small detail, "the feast of Passover was near." No detail in such a carefully framed story is without consequence. John seems to be underlining that, just as for the Israelite slaves in Egypt, God is the source of freedom for us. God, through Jesus, sees where we are enslaved and alienated, where we are far off, and comes to bring us back, to liberate us, protect us, feed us and make us a community--- a People of God. Through this God, in Jesus, we are made sisters and brothers of one another, sharing the same meal, sharing the journey across the wilderness to freedom. The food we are given today at this liturgical celebration is the source of our freedom, helping us and giving us the courage to gather and go out freed from slavery. It also enables us to serve others enslaved, helping them to make the difficult journey with us to freedom.

Reminded of the Passover allusion, the preacher might use contemporary examples of groups who gather and help people get free of addictions, compulsive behavior, abusive situations, etc. Other examples might include those who tutor the illiterate, help others find work, train the unemployed get marketable skills, etc. We who eat at this table have been fed the meal of the prophets. The "mantle" of our prophet Jesus has fallen on us and we, like Elisha who followed the pattern of his master's life and works, are called to carry Jesus' vision, his presence into our world. We might pray at this liturgy today for a "double portion" of the Spirit, so that we will be able to fulfill the mission he has for us.

## RESOURCES FOR PREACHING SOCIAL ISSUES:

The following documents from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/U.S. Catholic Conference explore issues of PROTECTING HUMAN LIFE. To obtain copies or more information call: 1-800-235-8722.

### PROTECTING HUMAN LIFE

Living the Gospel of Life, 1998

Faithful for Life: A Moral Reflection, 1995

Resolution on Abortion, 1989

Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation, 1985

Documentation on the Right to Life and Abortion, 1974, 1976, 1981

Sowing the Weapons of War, 1995

The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace, 1993

A Report on the Challenge of Peace and Policy Developments 1983-1988, 1989

The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, 1983

Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities, 1999

Nutrition and Hydration: Moral and Pastoral Reflections, 1992

NCCB Administrative Committee Statement on Euthanasia, 1991

Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, 1989  
1984

A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty, 1999

Confronting a Culture of Violence, 1995

U.S. Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment, 1980

Community and Crime, 1978

### QUOTABLE

It would be my advice to the priest that he must preach the word of God and let it challenge without becoming strident and obnoxious, judgmental and personal. He must give the vision of a better world and encourage all to cooperate to build it and increase signs of the kingdom that give so much hope to those in need. He must encourage all to do works of charity and stimulate them to go beyond the easy charity of just sharing what one has left over or can take a tax deduction on. He must encourage the laity to be involved in social action though the many organizations that our society so easily produces.

—Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B. D.D., addressing priests in, *BEING A PRIEST TODAY*, ed. Donald J. Goergen, The Liturgical Press, 1992, 184.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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