

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 18th SUNDAY (B)

Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15 Psalm 78 Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24 John 6: 24-35
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Last week we began chapter 6 in John's Gospel. From now until the end of August these Sunday gospel passages will continue to be from that chapter. As we hear the readings each week it will help our understanding if we keep in mind the context and the flow of the story within John 6.

Last week Jesus multiplied the bread and fish for the vast crowd. After he performed the multiplication, Jesus realized that the people wanted to make him king, so he slipped off by himself. The crowd chased after him and, as we hear today, they found him on the other side of the lake, at Capernaum. It is typical in John's Gospel that after Jesus performs a miracle he enters into a dialogue, either with some Pharisees, or as we see today, with the crowds. This is John's way to draw out the deeper meaning of the "sign" Jesus has performed and its meaning for the Christian community for whom John was writing his gospel.

We read these dialogues, not just because we are interested in what happened 2000 years ago. We believe the Lord is risen and that he has something to say to us today, just as he did to the crowds. After tracking him down the people ask him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Not exactly a relevant or important question, is it? We do the same, with our limited vision and lack of understanding, we ask the wrong questions. What is encouraging in the story is that Jesus does not rebuke his questioners or send them away, instead he engages them in conversation. We have a lot to learn from Jesus and, if we stick with the conversation by both speaking and listening to him, we will grow in our understanding of who he is and who we are to become.

We gather again on another Sunday to celebrate Eucharist. Perhaps this was a very busy week, and we did not have much time or thought for Jesus. But we are here with our questions and with open ears to hear what he has to say to us. His comment to the crowd implies a question he is asking them and us as well, "What are you looking for?" Are we praying to Jesus today because we believe he can get us out of a difficulty we've gotten into, or a misfortune that has befallen us?

There is certainly nothing wrong with praying when we are in need. But Jesus has even more to give us, for isn't our greatest hunger the one we have for God? Do

we want to experience God's life in us and have a deeper relationship with God? That's the bread that Jesus is offering us. In receiving Jesus today, we receive the very life of God. For, as Jesus tells his disciples later in the gospel, "I am the way...." Realizing what our deepest hungers are, we make the petition of the crowd our own, "Sir, give us this bread always."

A friend of mine was setting out on an eight-hour car trip. As he was packing his car several of us asked, "Do you have enough food for the journey?" He said he did and even if he didn't, he could still eat at a rest stop. But in Jesus's time there were no rest stops along the sides of the road, so carrying enough food for the journey could mean the difference between life and death. Thus, it was a custom of the time to give food to those departing for a trip.

We are all on a journey and we don't know how long it will last. Some sections of the trip may be perilous, faith-testing, exhausting and disorienting. We can always provide for our physical food; but to stay faithful to our calling as disciples of Jesus, we will need food that only he can provide – his very self. Isn't that why we come each week to this liturgical celebration, to be nourished by God's Word and the sacred meal God provides for us, Jesus Christ – our food for the journey?

There are as many hungers as there are people at our Eucharist. Some of us in the pews hunger for physical food: we are unemployed or under-employed; we lack adequate health care for medical emergencies; we struggle to pay tuition bills, etc. What can we in the parish do to address the hungers of our struggling brothers and sisters? Some parishes have food pantries, volunteer nurses and doctors, arrangements for lodging, job training, legal counsel, etc.

Jesus saw the hunger of the crowds and fed them. Certainly, he would want us to address the physical hungers of those in our community. Jesus, the bread from heaven, gives us sight to enable us to see our immediate surroundings. With the eyes that he gives us we can see the hungers of people who are, not only our neighbors, but those beyond our borders. Consider, for example, the Christ-inspired vision of the organization "Bread for the World." Guided by the compassion of Jesus they describe themselves as: "... a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and while Jesus addresses people's physical hungers, he also challenges them not to search for physical food alone – for they will be hungry again. Besides physical appetites, we also have spiritual and emotional hungers. As chapter 6 proceeds, we will learn

more about how Jesus will satisfy these hungers. But, for now, why not try to name the hunger we feel at this moment in our lives or the hungers we experience in our families and then hold out our empty hands and ask Jesus to feed us. He sees our hungers and will not deny us the daily bread we need.

John describes Jesus as a wonder worker; but he also shows him as someone who gives us bread “always.” Jesus is “the bread from heaven,” the one God has sent to teach us to trust God. The people name Moses as the one who gave them bread from heaven -- but Jesus corrects them. They fail to see that it wasn’t Moses, but God, who gave them the bread in the desert. Jesus encourages his contemporaries to see that now he is the bread that God is providing for them. Not only did God give bread in the past; but God also freely gives bread in the present. (John’s Gospel is very much a present-tense gospel.)

The crowd asks Jesus, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” In response he states the core gospel message: the first work we must do is to believe in Christ, “the one God sent.” Having faith in Jesus is to believe God already loves us (John 3: 16). We don’t have to earn that love, Jesus is the visible sign of it. Accepting him and his message is to eat the bread of life, which “gives life to the world.”

Living the life of Jesus in the world is hard. We can get discouraged, want to give up, or even lose our way. Sometimes the world of death seems to be triumphing over the life God wants to give us. The front page of any newspaper is enough to discourage us. The gospel today reminds us however; we are not making our journey alone. We travel with one another, sustained by the bread of life given us by a gracious God.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

So, the people said to Jesus,
“Sir, give us this bread always.”
He said to them, “I am the bread of life,
whoever comes to me will never hunger,
and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

Reflection:

While Jesus addresses people's physical hungers, he also challenges us not to search for physical food alone – for we will be hungry again. He encourages us to come to him for the food that lasts. Why not try to name the hunger we feel at this moment in our lives and then hold out our empty hands and ask Jesus to feed us. He sees our hungers and will not deny us the daily bread we need.

So, we ask ourselves:

- What is our deepest hunger our most urgent thirst?
- What physical hunger in the world are we being called to address?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD
BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

This coming Thursday, August 6th we will celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus as well as the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, an event of catastrophic “transfiguration”. Our Church, through the voices of Popes and Bishops has spoken out forcefully on the subject of Nuclear Weapons.

“In the face of the man-made calamity that every war is, one must affirm and reaffirm, again and again, that the waging of war is not inevitable or unchangeable. Humanity is not destined to self-destruction. Clashes of ideologies, aspirations and needs can and must be settled and resolved by means other than war and violence.”

Pope John Paul II, Appeal for Peace, Hiroshima, Japan.

“Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent because it is the excuse and justification for the continued possession and further development of these horrendous weapons.” ***US Catholic Bishops, The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence***

“The time has come to rid planet Earth of nuclear weapons-all of them, everywhere... Nuclear weapons, whether used or threatened, are grossly evil and morally wrong. ***Cardinal Danneels, Statement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee***

“...the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree.” ***Gaudium et Spes, Second Vatican Council***

“This Conference resolves to call upon our respective governments to urge all nations to agree by treaty to stop the production, testing, stock-piling and usage of nuclear weapons and to press for an international mandate for all member states to prohibit nuclear warfare.” ***Archbishop Martino, Apostolic Nuncio, UN***

“We must all pray that no human hand will ever again do what has been done

here.” *Mother Teresa, Nagasaki, Japan.*

“(Today) excessive nuclear arsenals, their continued spread, and proposals to further develop and use them underscore the need for much deeper cuts in nuclear weapons and ultimately a global nuclear ban.” *US Catholic Bishops 2003*

What can I do?

- Pray fervently for peace, and that the renewed attempts of our government to reduce nuclear weapons will be successful.
- Learn more about international policies and treaties surrounding nuclear weapons. Speak out in the words of our Popes and Bishops. Be a voice of peace.
- Contact your Senators and Representatives. Ask them to vote in favor of the elimination of all nuclear weapons testing and production.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, *“People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Roger Blakeney #0033802 (On death row since 9/10/97)
- Marcos Mitchell #0488288 (11/4/97)
- Jerry Cummings #0095361 (11/11/97)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”, Jude Siciliano, OP - FrJude@JudeOP.org