

17th Sunday of Year

Last Sunday St Mark's Gospel left us at the point when Jesus was just about to feed the Five Thousand, but instead of continuing with St Mark's account the Church give us that from St John's Gospel. Over the next five weeks we hear not only the story, but Our Lord's explanation of it in his 'Bread of Life Discourse'. In part this is to compensate for the shortness of St Mark's Gospel when spreading it over the thirty three weeks of Ordinary Time, but more importantly it give us as an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the meaning of the Eucharist as the bread of Life.

Today, though, we listen to the story. This is what St Augustine had to say 1600 years ago:

"The miracles wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ are truly divine works, which lead the human mind through visible things to a perception of the Godhead. God is not the kind of being that can be seen with the eyes, and small account is taken of the miracles by which he rules the entire universe and governs all creation because they recur so regularly. Scarcely anyone bothers to consider God's marvellous, his amazing artistry in every tiny seed. And so certain works are excluded from the ordinary course of nature, works which God in his mercy has reserved for himself, so as to perform them at appropriate times. People who hold cheap what they see every day are dumbfounded at the sight of extraordinary works even though they are no more wonderful than the others.

Governing the entire universe is a greater miracle than feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread, yet no one marvels at it. People marvel at the feeding of the five thousand not because this miracle is greater, but because it is out of the ordinary. Who is even now providing nourishment for the whole world if not the God who creates a field of wheat from a few seeds? Christ did what God does. Just as God multiplies a few seeds into a whole field of wheat, so Christ multiplied the five loaves in his hands. For there was power in the hands of Christ."

The crowds came to Jesus because they lacked hope and life lacked meaning – St Mark says they were like sheep without a shepherd. Our Lord's response was not just to teach them but to give them a sign. As St Augustine tells us, the miracle of their feeding is a sign reminding us of the daily wonder of life. God brought us into being. He sustains us in life. The psalm tells us that God is not tight-fisted. He opens his hands to us in our need. These words form part of the Monastic grace before meals. Before distributing the five loaves and two fish to the crowds Our Lord raises his eyes to heaven and gives thanks to the Father for what he has given and what he will give. The Eucharist is the sign and pledge of God's generosity. The very word 'Eucharist' means 'thanksgiving'. The Mass is our Sunday or even daily act of thanksgiving for the wonders of God's gifts, material as well as spiritual.

While this is always true objectively – Christ the High Priest gives thanks on our behalf in Heaven and at every Mass – is it true subjectively? Am I a grateful person who naturally gives thanks for what I receive in life or do I take things for granted? Both 'please' and 'thank you' are small but important words in our relationships with God and other people. A small way in which we can develop a sense of gratitude is by 'saying grace' before or after meals. It does not have to be out loud but for parents with young children this can be a good thing to encourage a healthy attitude. When the children were small my friends encouraged each member of the family to take turns using either their own words or a selection of prepared texts. When we take what God puts on the table each day as a gift, not an entitlement, we also become more aware of those through whom his gift has come to us – a whole chain of people including farmers, those who pick and package our food, transport it to the shops and those who prepare our meals or, if we prepare our own, for the skills and cooking facilities involved. To feed the 5000 Jesus needed a small boy to offer his bread and fish! The more we are aware of the wonders of God's generosity in our daily lives the more we will come to Mass with grateful hearts and the more the Mass will truly become our own act of thanksgiving.