

## Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

In the Gospel story to which we have just listened, Jesus miraculously feeds a large crowd with just five loaves and two fish. People eat as much as they want, and the twelve apostles end up a basketful each of leftovers, so that they can go on feeding the hungry just as Jesus has done. It is not easy to know what to make of such a story. If it is as easy for God to feed the hungry as that, we can be excused for wondering why so many millions of men, women and children are dying of hunger. What is the message John is trying to get across in this extraordinary scene? In every part of today's liturgy, we find quite beautiful statements about God's care, yet when we look at the world scene, and even at our own lives and the lives of those to whom we are close, there is so much starvation around - people starving for food, starving for meaning, starving for love. This is so prevalent that some are even driven to doubt the very existence of God.

Let us begin with the Entrance antiphon: 'God is in his holy dwelling; he will give a home to the lonely'. What does this mean when we see millions fleeing from so-called ethnic cleansing, or fear of tribal vendettas? How is God caring for them? And what about people who have given of their best but find themselves suffering the loneliness of a broken relationship? And what about homeless children? The Responsorial Psalm speaks of the universal providence of God. The inspired author assures us: 'The Lord answers all our needs'. Does he? We also heard the words: 'You open wide your hand, and grant the desires of all who live.' In a verse of the psalm that is not included in today's selected verses, we are told: 'The Lord is good to all and he is moved with compassion for all that he has made'(Ps 145:9). How does all this fit with the real world that we know?

The key to getting some insight into this profound problem is in recognising the nature of love. Love does not control. Love does not intrude. God is love and God has given human beings their most precious gift – the gift of freedom. If we use our freedom to love, the most wonderful things happen in our world. If we use our freedom to destroy, or just look away and pretend not to see, the most terrible things happen. God had to risk evil if we human beings were ever going to really love. The only way in which terrible crimes will stop is when people learn to love, and all God's creative energy is directed to this. God does not stand back while evil has its way. God is present with God's all-powerful love, loving the perpetrators of evil to change their behaviour, loving the victims of oppression, and loving everyone else to intervene for good. If we are not listening, the problem lies there.

Let us return to the Gospel. At the beginning, the crowd is interested in Jesus because they think of him as a miracle worker who can provide short-cuts to success. Sadly, at the end they seem to have learned nothing. However, Jesus is inviting them to get in touch with a deeper hunger than their hunger for material bread, and John paints the scene the way he has to help us listen to the call of God as expressed by the prophet Isaiah: 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? ... Come to me; listen, so that you may live'(Isaiah 55:2-3).

We are being asked to believe that whatever our circumstances, God is meeting our need for love. We are being asked to believe this even in the most terrible circumstances. Jesus believed it even when he was abandoned on the cross. If we believe this, then we will know how to find God in any circumstance. Put love there and God will be there. It is as simple and as demanding

as this. Jesus did it, and each of us has the means to do it. It may seem that all we have is a basket full of scraps, but that is the miracle. Think what the world would be like if more of us were truly like Jesus, if we listened to his plea and had the courage to express and live out the compassion of God so as to allow that compassion to be seen. It is to this that Paul is inviting us in the beautiful Second Reading of today's Mass. We prayed for it in the Prayer: 'God our Father, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendour of creation, in the beauty of human life. Touched by your hand our world is holy. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us, to share your blessings with our brothers and sisters, and to experience the joy of life in your presence'. If we allow ourselves to give in to the depression that the world's and our own suffering almost forces upon us, we will never be able to help ourselves or others in need. We need to notice also the amazing love that happens in every street of this city, day in and day out. We need to allow the compassion of God to move our hearts so that we do what we can to reach out to others in their pain.

It is not just a matter of learning from Jesus to be compassionate. Our faith is that God is love, and if we open our hearts to God, if we learn to be sensitive to God's presence in the world, we will find that it is his love that flows through us to others. Wherever God's love is working, miracles are happening - not perhaps the miracles we seek, but miracles nonetheless - miracles of love. There would be no beauty in this world if there were no God. There would be no love. Do we realise that? Or are we content to live on the surface of things. When we look at the lives of the saints we are stunned by the amount of love that flowed through them. We cannot help thinking that if we were to dare the same journey, that would be the answer to our dilemma, and if enough people heeded the words of Jesus, imagine what a beautiful world we would have. Then indeed would the glory of God fill the earth.

The massive extent of evil and of suffering leaves our minds perplexed, but our response is not to be one of apathy or exhaustion. Rather, we are called to believe and to genuinely cry out to God in our distress, and to trust that he is answering even though, like Jesus on the cross, we cannot hear or feel the response. While this does not get us out of our dilemma, it at least gives us something to do while we suffer through the mystery. Human compassion that flowers in the garden of God's grace is our world's most precious gift.

We are called to believe that death is not the end of human life. We will never be able to live with the perplexity of suffering without faith in the life beyond death. It was in the Resurrection that God showed his care for Jesus and it will be the same for the hosts of people who die in persecution and violence, abandoned, it seems, to die alone. With so many people in today's world dying of physical hunger and emotional deprivation, we cannot limit our thinking to this world when we try to believe in the bread that Jesus promises to give those dying of hunger in the desert. While we offer our hearts and our lives to help bring reconciliation and peace, we must, like Jesus, keep our vision open to that communion with God which is eternal and for which our hearts yearn.

Finally, we are asked to believe that God is as he is described in today's readings. While our mind cannot comprehend the wonder of God's love, there have been moments in our lives when we have been touched by grace. Let us reflect upon those moments and hold them close. They will encourage us to continue in faith when the way is dark. We do not know what miraculous effect our small acts of love might have in this suffering world. Mary, the Mother of

Jesus, was blessed because she believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled. God did take Jesus into eternal glory in the risen life. He does give the lonely a home. He will grant the desires of all who live. Let us come to the Eucharist today, hungry for all the love that the Heart of Jesus holds for us. He will give us himself, and satisfy us by offering us all that we need to continue our journey of faith, hope and love towards our eternal home. We have all the grace we need to take the next step of love. We have all the grace we need to harness for God all the energies of love in the world around us.