

## Homily: 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

It's a great joy to hear your voices raised in song again after such a long time. Our hearts, minds and voices are raised in praise and thanksgiving to God as we celebrate the Eucharist. Indeed, the word 'Eucharist' means thanksgiving, so it's wonderful that we can now express our gratitude to the Lord with full voice.

Today's Gospel presents us with a 'catechesis in action' on this sacrament. The feeding of the 5000 tells us so much about the Eucharist: the two are inseparably linked. This miracle took place "just before the Jewish feast of Passover" – in other words, the same time of year as the Last Supper. Jesus took bread, blessed it and gave it to the people – the same actions He will later perform on the night of His arrest. He feeds the multitude as a sign that He will feed countless people not with earthly bread, but with the spiritual food of His own Body and Blood. After the miracle He instructs the disciples to gather together what is left, "so that nothing is wasted." This is important: it reminds us of the need to treat the Blessed Sacrament with the greatest respect and reverence. It also shows us the need to approach Holy Communion with love. If we come without preparation, or we come without being conscious of who it is that we receive, or we forget to make a thanksgiving – then we diminish the effectiveness of this gift within us. In this sense, the gift can be 'wasted' on us. But the Lord says: nothing must be wasted. So we try to ensure that each and every time we approach this sacrament, we do so with the greatest love and devotion, so that the Lord's grace may be truly effective in us.

Today's miracle points us not only to the Eucharist, but to the cross: the two are inseparably linked. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "This is my Body, given for you... my Blood, poured out for you." He is speaking both of the Eucharist and of His death. We see a hint of this link at the end of the Gospel today. St John records that, having seen the miracle, the people want to "take Jesus by force and make Him king." There is only one other time in the Gospel when Jesus is taken by force: in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He is arrested. We might think that these two are very different. After the miracle, they want to take Him by force to make Him king, not to execute Him. But look at the cross: What do we read above the Lord's head? "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews". The very title they want to give Him after the miracle of the loaves is the title He does receive on the cross. Jesus, we are told, "escaped into the hills by Himself." He is separated from His disciples and goes into the hills. Later He will go to the hill of Calvary, again separated from His disciples, making a journey that He alone can make.

When the people want to make Jesus their king, it is their plan, not His. And there is an earlier point in today's Gospel where the Lord's plan is very different to that of the people with Him. He asks the disciples, "Where can we buy enough food for all these people?" It is a test: the correct answer is, "We can't, Lord; but You can provide." But the disciples don't see it. Philip points out that even 200 denarii – a sizeable amount of money – would only buy enough for a small piece each. Andrew also sees this as a hopeless situation: they have five loaves and two fish, "but what is that between so many?" These two apostles display a sense of hopelessness, almost despair in the face of this problem.

St John records the small but important detail that these loaves and fish came from “a small boy.” Where are his parents? He hasn’t come on his own! But the adults don’t bring the food: it is the small boy who comes forward, wanting to help. When I visit school and ask the children about some problem, they never say, “There is no solution to this.” They will always look for a way forward, always believing that something can be done. They always have hope. When I was a seminarian I did a placement in Egremont, and as part of it I led an assembly during Advent. I tried to get the children to imagine being in a cave in complete darkness. When I asked them to describe it, the answers that came back were not what I had hoped for. “You could take a torch”, one suggested. “But you don’t have a torch”, I replied. “Well, perhaps you could take matches”, said another. “Or flares”, said a third. Rather than imagine the darkness, they looked for a solution to the problem. Children always believe that something can be done. They always have hope. Perhaps this is one of things that Jesus means when He teaches us, elsewhere in the Gospel, to be like little children. As Christians, we always have hope, not because we have solutions, but because we have Jesus.

And so we need to learn to be like this small boy, and bring the little we have to the Lord. At this and at every Mass, when bread and wine are placed on the altar, they symbolise our lives – our joys, our sorrows, the small contribution we make to those around us. We bring them and present them to Jesus, for Him to multiply many times over. Perhaps sometimes we come very aware of problems, in our own lives, in our families, in the world. We may feel that these problems have no solution, or that the small contribution we make is woefully inadequate. Bring it to Jesus, for Him to multiply it. The bread and wine placed on the altar are transformed to become the Body and Blood of our Saviour: the gift that we receive back from the altar greatly outweighs what we present there. And when we present our lives to Jesus, the gifts of grace to help us in our daily lives greatly outweigh the offering we make.

The crowd wanted to make Jesus king. It was their plan, not His. Today’s Gospel says to us: bring to Jesus your problems, not your plans! Bring Him the small contribution you can make to help alleviate those sufferings, and believe that He can and will multiply your humble contribution many times over. Be a child – never despair, but be filled with the hope which comes from faith in Jesus, who receives a little from us and gives back many times more.

Fr Andrew

