

## Homily for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B

July 28, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: 2 Kings 4:42-44 (Elisha feeds a hundred men with 20 barley loaves.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 145 (The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6 (Strive to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.)*

*Gospel: John 6:1-15 (The multiplication of the loaves and fishes.)*

“The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.” That’s the refrain that we sang for today’s responsorial psalm. Before and after those comforting words of Psalm 145, we heard two stories in which the Lord *literally* fed his people, through miracles worked at the hands of the Prophet Elisha and Jesus himself. The two events are not equivalent by any means — only *similar*. Jesus tops Elisha by orders of magnitude. Elisha needed twenty loaves and some additional grain to satisfy only *100 people*; Jesus needed a mere five loaves and two fish to feed *5,000 people*! The enormous scope of Jesus’ miracle suggests that it’s not just a ramped-up version of what Elisha did. Rather, there is a *qualitative difference* between the divine power at Jesus’ disposal and the limited authority that God granted to some of his greatest prophets in the past.

There’s also a difference in *meaning* between these two miracles. Both seem like pretty straightforward demonstrations of the hand of the Lord feeding his people and answering *one particular need*, namely, for physical nourishment. But we need to look a little deeper at the two situations and the *spiritual* needs of those two crowds. Which *additional* needs was the Lord answering through Elisha and through Jesus? In other words, what does the physical feeding *represent* in each of these two stories?

The Prophet Elisha and his predecessor, Elijah, appear in the First and Second Books of Kings, where their exploits are intermingled with narratives about the Kings of Israel who are their contemporaries. The Kings possess all the *temporal* power, while the Prophets possess all the *spiritual* power. While the Kings wage wars and issue decrees and act with impunity to carry out *their own will*, the Prophets carry out *God’s will*. They call people to repentance and faithfulness to God’s covenant, and they work various miracles to save people in desperate straits. Their miracles, like the feeding that we heard about in today’s first reading, demonstrate that the Lord cares for his people and satisfies their needs in ways that their Kings *cannot*. The Lord sees the affliction of his people, takes pity on them, and intervenes through his prophets to “answer all their needs,” as the Psalmist proclaimed.

The crowd following Jesus also had an obvious need for physical nourishment, but John suggests that they sought much more than that from Jesus. He says that the people were following Jesus “because they saw *the signs he was performing on the sick*.” So, they recognized in Jesus a power to heal body and soul. What they did not yet understand was the spiritual meaning of the food that he shared with them on that mountaintop. For us, this event clearly points toward the *Eucharist*. And we know that in the Eucharist, Jesus offers us much



more than physical food. He invites us to participate in his passion and death, and to share intimate communion with him as a means to achieve eternal life.

John hints at this meaning with certain details in the story. For example, as the crowd assembles around Jesus, John notes that the Jewish feast of *Passover* was near. This may seem like a completely irrelevant piece of information, but it's not. At the Last Supper, Jesus transformed the meaning of the Passover meal by telling his disciples that the bread and wine traditionally offered in that ritual would become his Body and Blood. He was to become the *new Passover lamb*, the Lamb of God who reconciles the world to the Father by shedding his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. That sacrifice is made present, again and again, whenever the Church celebrates Eucharist together. When the People of God gather around the altar for this sacred meal, we are also joining the Lord and his disciples in the intimacy of the Last Supper, *and*, at the same time, we are standing vigil at the foot of his cross. Later, when we come forward to receive Holy Communion, we symbolically come to Jesus like that crowd on the mountaintop, trusting that the meager rations given to us will satisfy us with such abundance that the graces will overflow like the fragments that filled those twelve wicker baskets.

It's ironic that the people who witnessed this miracle declared Jesus to be "the Prophet" and wanted to carry him off to make him king. In fact, what Jesus had just shown them by this sign was that he's *more* than a prophet or a king. He came not just to satisfy the people's immediate spiritual and temporal needs. Rather, he is our *Savior*, who came to set us free from the cares of this world and raise us up to eternal life. He invites us to come to him, to hear his Word and receive his Body and Blood. In the words of the Psalmist, he wants to "feed us and answer *all our needs*," with an abundance that we can scarcely imagine.

However, our communion with Christ cannot be complete unless there is also *unity among us*, who make up his Mystical Body in the world. Hence, St. Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, pleads with his fellow Christians to "preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace," by practicing the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience and love. He also encourages us to recognize the many sources of unity which bind us together. There is one (Holy) *Spirit*, which lives and moves in all of us, guiding us gently along the path toward holiness. There is one *hope* (of eternal life with God). There is one *Lord* (Jesus Christ), who suffered and died for all of us, and who prayed that all of his disciples would be one, as he and the Father are one. There is one *faith* (in Jesus Christ), shared by all who claim the title "Christian." There is one *baptism* (into the death and resurrection of Christ), through which all of us are saved. And there is "one *God and Father of all*, who is over all and through all and in all."

We can experience that unity with God, with each other, and with all of Creation when we come to the Eucharistic table to receive the Lord *together as brothers and sisters*. Divisions among us can melt away as we embrace communion with Christ and with each other. But this doesn't happen automatically. We must open our hearts to the grace of the Sacrament and seek all those Christian virtues which St. Paul enumerates in his letter. Let us invite the Lord to bring us together, to feed us, to answer all our needs, and to make us one *in him*.