

FEEDING THE HUNGRY: 18TH SUNDAY A

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There are at least three kinds of hunger. There is a hunger for bread, for the food and drink that satisfy physical hunger and nourish health and life. There is emotional hunger, a hunger for acceptance and welcome, affirmation and affection from others. And there is spiritual hunger, a craving for the company of good people. For Christians this includes the company of Jesus Christ most of all.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta has spoken well of these three kinds of hunger. She says:

Your poverty is greater than ours ... the spiritual poverty of the West is much greater than the physical poverty of the East. In the West, there are millions of people who suffer loneliness and emptiness, who feel unloved and unwanted. They are not the hungry in the physical sense; what is missing is a relationship with God and with each other.

In the gospel today we meet people who are experiencing these three kinds of hunger. Their greatest hunger is for the company of Jesus, for the enlightenment, truth and challenge of the words he speaks, and for the warmth and comfort of his understanding, kindness and compassion.

Tired out from hard work, and looking for a little rest and recreation, Jesus sails with his friends for the eastern shore of the lake. But seeing where the boat is heading, the crowds hurry to reach that shore on foot. You can imagine what you and I might have thought and even said about this. Jesus too might easily have felt annoyed and resentful, and even have moaned and groaned: *'Why won't they leave me alone for a while? Why won't they let me have a little bit of time to myself? Why won't they give me just a bit of peace and quiet? Why won't they stay away? Why won't they?'*

But Jesus, *'the man for others'*, thinks no such thoughts. He thinks only of them, of their need for him, and of the love and assistance he can provide. Sensing their longing to be with him, and seeing so many sick and troubled persons among them, his heart is moved with compassion. So he goes from one little group to the other – talking to them, listening to them, comforting them. He heals their physically and mentally sick ones. Their cravings to be with him, then, and their longings for welcome and acceptance, affirmation and affection, are satisfied and fulfilled.

All this goes on for a long while. So long in fact, that his disciples, watching the sun sinking rapidly below the horizon, start to get impatient and annoyed. They speak bluntly to their leader of the frustrations they are feeling: *'This is an isolated place, they say, 'and the time has slipped by; so send the people away, and they can go to the villages to buy themselves some food.'* 'No way,' Jesus says just as directly: *'you give them something to eat yourselves.'* Grudgingly they place in the hands of Jesus the five loaves and the two fish, their own picnic lunch. First Jesus thanks God for these gifts of fish and bread. Then he breaks the loaves into pieces, hands them to his disciples, who give out the food to the crowds.

Something amazing is happening here. Not only is Jesus multiplying the bread. Not only is he feeding the hungry people with more food than they can eat. He is also involving his disciples in the task of feeding such a vast number of people - well over five thousand at a single sitting. It's a sign of things to come.

All this has much to say to us as friends and followers of Jesus today. We must face, first of all, the physical hunger of millions of our fellow human beings around the world at any time. Can we any longer feel easy about so much conspicuous consumption when so many others lack the basic necessities of life, and are even starving to death? What will Jesus say to us on Judgment Day? Will it be *'I was hungry, and you gave me food? I was thirsty and you gave me drink'* (Mt 25:35-36)? Or will it be *'I was hungry and you never gave me food, I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink'* (Mt 25:42-43)?

In the second place, you and I keep coming across deprived, despised and lonely people, yearning for just a little bit of affirmation, a little bit of acceptance, and a little bit of affection. The problems in both city and country of persons being picked on and bullied, of runaway and homeless children, of drug addiction, of domestic violence, of suicide, are but symptoms of deep unsatisfied longings to be loved and to love. Can we, then, be a little more sensitive, a little more responsive, a little more proactive and caring towards hurt, lost and lonely persons out there, and perhaps even right here among us? And will we let our Leader say to us: *'I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me'* (Mt 25:36-37)?

Over and over again, Jesus clearly identified himself with people in physical, emotional and spiritual need. To meet them is to meet him. *'In truth I tell you,'* he says, *'in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me'* (Mt 25:40-41) and *'in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me'* (Mt 25:45).

It's the very same nurturing Jesus whom we are meeting today in our celebration of this Eucharist. Soon he will be nourishing us with the gift of himself in bread and wine. Soon he will be sending us out to others to be his eyes, ears, heart, hands and feet. May we do more than we've ever done before, then, to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual hungers of all those needing and waiting for us to be for them agents of the goodness of Jesus Christ and missionaries of God's love!