

"Bread of Life"

Homily of August 3, 2003

by Fr. Brian Joyce

Five weeks... Five weeks, we get the same scene from the gospel. This happens every three years. We had, last week, the story of the Loaves and Fishes, which I described as a familiar, remarkable, and controversial passage. And for the next four weeks, we hear about the discourse about "Bread of Life" that explains what that was all about. So, we get five weeks. That's a lot of bread... It's a lot of bread. You know, I kiddingly say to young people making their First Communion, I ask them what their favorite bread is. And then I tell them my favorites are hot dog buns and donut holes. But the real truth is my absolute favorite bread was the Irish soda bread that my mother would make. It was just wonderful. Even Jesus could never match that. Of course, he was a carpenter from Nazareth, not a baker from Galilee. So we couldn't expect him to.

One of my favorite experiences and memories is around the Loaves and Fishes and the Bread of Life. In 1985, I visited the Holy Land with a group of twenty-eight priests who were studying in Rome, with my sister and some other friends and relatives. And we went to a place called Tagba. Tagba is on the shore of Galilee. There is a church there which is, according to the guides, on the exact spot where the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes took place. Now, that either was discovered by archaeologists or invented by the Galilee Chamber of Commerce. We don't know which. But it is a very nice church. It has a mosaic on the floor of the Loaves and Fishes that has been there over a thousand years.

Twenty-eight of us priests got up around the altar to concelebrate. One of the priests (You are not going to believe this. And I am not going to tell you his name or what state he is from, but it is nowhere near here.) on my right was a monsignor who was very grumpy and very difficult and very rigid and very conservative, and really a pain. Now I know you don't believe me, but trust me. It was true. There is only one in the world, and this was he. We got to the greeting of peace and there were about seventy-five or eighty people in church who were there on tours or visiting or whatever. We went out to greet people. All the priests went back to the altar and we had to wait because he was still out there talking to two women and shaking his head at them. And, then he came walking up. We were ready to begin again, and he got so far up and he stopped. Then he went back and started talking to them again. So, with this big delay, the first thing after Mass, we said to him, "What was that all about?" He said, "Well, these two women said to me, 'We're not Catholics. Is it all right if we go to Communion?'" And I said, "No. Absolutely not! And then I walked up to the altar and I got right about here and I said, 'What would Jesus do?' And I went back and I said, 'Sure you can come to Communion.'" And they came to Communion with tears in their eyes.

We talked to them after Mass. They were two women from Australia. They were not even baptized Christians. But they had heard about Jesus, and they were running an orphanage for

retarded children that was about to close down for lack of funds. And they opened the Bible and read the story about the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes. They made a promise that, if they were able to survive and continue to help these young people, they would personally make a pilgrimage and go to Tagba. The next week, they began getting donations and contributions and volunteers and their orphanage thrived. They were there that day for that reason, and had Communion with us. It is a fond memory.

A few reflections on it: One is, this "What would Jesus do?".... I don't disagree with what the monsignor said to them, and starting with "What would Jesus do?" can be a help. But, you have to be very careful about it. It is easily misused. It very often ends up that I end up doing what I was going to do anyway, but now I blame it on Jesus. Or, rather than asking, "What would I do if I were like Jesus?" I ask "What would Jesus do if Jesus were like me?" And I end up getting his endorsement for something I was going to do anyway. So you have to be careful with that. But I put in, as an invisible footnote, that Jesus did say something very specific in this area. He said, "No one who comes to me will go hungry... No one who comes to me won't be fed." And he said that to five thousand men, and probably six thousand women, all of whom were non-Catholics. As a matter of fact, if you look at this meal up here, Jesus is sharing the first Mass and Communion with twelve non-Catholics. Now, that does not settle the very difficult question of inter-Communion, because Communion, for us, both nourishes us and the world, but also gives us our very specific identity. So, there is a tension there. But I do think it is something the Church has to reflect on and face.

All this talk about bread. It's not about wheat flour and water and yeast. The gospel writers are pointing to the Eucharist, and Jesus is pointing to bread as a metaphor that stands for our deepest needs, our deepest hungers and our deepest nourishment for life. So, you are going to be lucky. I am going to list some hungers and nourishment in our lives. And you may want to think about what are yours. I say you are lucky, because I got an emergency call and I had to fly to New York Thursday night for an all-day meeting Friday, and I didn't get in until one o'clock yesterday morning. So, I only have a list of seven. With a little more time, I could come up with a list of a hundred, I think.

But, first of all, there is the hunger that is physical, and the nourishment that we need is food and lodging.

Secondly, there is the hunger of loneliness, and the nourishment we need is friendship and companionship, which sometimes is just a very simple gesture. Remember the story of the little kindergarten girl whose father had died, and her classmate went over and sat with her? After about an hour, the teacher took the classmate aside and said, "What did you say to her? You know, she lost her father, and what did you say to her?" She said, "I didn't say anything. I just helped her to cry." Sometimes, we just have to be there for one another, for the hunger of loneliness.

The hunger of forgiveness, and the nourishment we need is peace of heart, and we have to remember it is always hard to forgive. And sometimes it is even harder to let ourselves be forgiven.

The fourth hunger I list is self-esteem, and we need emotional support to nourish us, not advice or answers or the right thing to do, but people who stand by us with respect and with concern.

The fifth hunger I list is learning. We need that our whole lives. We never can stop learning. We never have all the answers. We need the nourishment of wisdom. In fact, I think the Catholic Church has a teaching that, even after you die, you have this joyful place of learning called Purgatory. We keep growing. We never stop growing.

The sixth hunger I have is spiritual growth, and for that we need a prayer life that is both private and public, because every one of us is both a private individual and a public person too. We need both.

The seventh and last hunger, and nourishment, is community. We need a community that welcomes us, that is inclusive and that gives us our identity. Two weeks ago, we had Dr. Toinette Eugene talk to us about community in our adult education series. Some of you will recognize this name if you were afflicted with a philosophy course along the way. She talked about the French philosopher Rene Descartes. He based his philosophy and his understanding of how we know who we are and that there is life at all and that it is not all an illusion on the phrase, "Cogito. Ergo sum." A Frenchman talking Latin, "I think. Therefore, I am." He was saying, "I am. I know that I am because I think. That's how I know." Well, she responded to that, not to say, "I am because I think," but "I am because we are." Every one of us comes from a family, from a tribe, from a nation, and hopefully from a faith community. And that faith community helps us know who we are. "I am because we are."

I would suggest that, during this week, you may want to think about what hungers you have, and what to do about it. Or, you may want to think about the other side, which is what nourishment can you give to someone else, and where should you begin, in giving nourishment to those who are physically hungry or those who have the hunger of loneliness or the need for forgiveness or the hunger for self-esteem or the hunger for learning. That may be for yourself, and of spiritual growth, and most of all of community. I am because we are. And we are because Christ is. And Christ continues to say to us, which is both a promise and challenge, and he says it through us, to one another, "I myself am the Bread of Life. No one who comes to Me shall hunger. No one who believes in Me shall thirst." Amen.