

The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:1-3
<i>Response</i>	Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 145:8-9, 15-16, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:35, 37-39
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 14:13-21

The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A brings us to one of the most famous miracles of Jesus anywhere in the Gospels, and that is the feeding of the 5000. I say it's the most famous miracle of Jesus because it's actually the only miracle of Jesus that's mentioned in all four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All have accounts of the feeding of the 5000. Clearly, this is something that was important to the four evangelists as they were selecting various actions and words of Jesus to communicate to their readers. So let's pay close attention to this very familiar miracle. What I'm going to try to do here is highlight an element of it that you might not have seen before, namely, how the miracle reveals Jesus to be not just the Messiah or the Son of God. Right, we tend to think of his miracles, all of those miracles collectively, as pointing to that, but also as a new Elisha, a new Elisha, as someone who is recapitulating the activities of the prophet Elisha from the Old Testament, the old Elisha, but then going beyond them and fulfilling them. Matthew 14:13-21 says this:

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said

to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.¹

So, because this Gospel episode is recounted in all four Gospels, I've done a lot of commentary on this in other videos. For our purposes here, I'd like to highlight this parallel between what Jesus does in this episode and a similar miracle in the Old Testament. So, if you turn back with me in the Old Testament to 2 Kings 4:42-44, we're going to see that this is not the first time there's been a feeding of a multitude with bread. Something similar is actually done by the prophet Elisha in the Old Testament. Now, as you're turning there, just a quick note: remember, Elisha is not the same as Elijah, right? So this can get really confusing in English because the sound of the two names is very similar in a way that it's not. In Hebrew, it's *êlîyāhū* and *êliyshā*, so you can hear the accent falls on different syllables and in ways that it's a little easier to distinguish them. But in English, if we say Elijah and Elisha, it sounds almost like the same name. So remember, Elijah is the first. He's the great prophet who is taken up into heaven on a fiery chariot at the end of his life when he crosses the river Jordan. His successor is Elisha (eh-lie'shuh), sometimes described as Elisha (ee'lee-shuh), to clearly distinguish him from Elijah, but even that's a little problematic because Elisha (ee'lee-shuh) sounds like a feminine name rather than a masculine name. So I'm just going to say Elisha (eh-lie'shuh) and I'll try to put the emphasis on the "SH" so that you're clear. So Elisha is the successor to Elijah who receives that double portion of the spirit from Elijah and then continues the ministry of his master, of his predecessor, of his prophetic predecessor. And so in 2 Kings chapter 4, we have a story of a feeding of a multitude that's performed by the prophet Elisha, and this is what happens:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

A man came from Ba'al-shal'ishah, bringing the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Eli'sha said, "Give to the men, that they may eat." But his servant said, "How am I to set this before a hundred men?" So he repeated, "Give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" So he set it before them. And they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

Now, you can see it's very easy to see the parallels between Elisha's activity in the Old Testament and Jesus's activity in the New Testament. First, you have a crowd of people. Second, the crowd of people is hungry. Third, you've got some bread but not enough to feed them. Fourth, the prophet commands to give the bread to the people anyway. And then fifth, some kind of miraculous multiplication takes place so that the crowd, who shouldn't be able to eat from this small amount of bread, is actually not only able to eat, but able to eat in such a way that there is some leftover, right? And then I guess I could add a sixth element, which is that this miracle is performed through the power of the Lord. It's something supernatural, something divine that happens at the Lord's express command. So, the parallels here are really clear between Elijah in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament in the feeding of the 5000, right?

And remember, Elisha was famous precisely because he was a prophet who didn't just proclaim oracles but performed miracles. Sometimes, Christians forget this. Not everyone in the Old Testament performs miracles. Not everyone in the Old Testament was known for performing miracles. There are figures from the Old Testament like Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, or say, the prophet Ezekiel or Jeremiah, just various figures. They might be known for their teaching, they might be known for their actions, but they weren't known for performing miracles. The miracles tend to be confined to certain key figures. Moses, of course, is the most famous of the miracle workers in the Old Testament with the plagues that are unleashed against the Egyptians, as well as other miraculous acts like striking the rock and the water flowing from the rock, things like that. And then, Elisha is the other major miracle worker in the Old Testament. So, Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, and especially Elisha, was known for performing these extraordinary miracles.

So, there are some prophets who just speak, there are others who are known for what they do, for their actions, and that's how Elisha is. Like, we don't have a book of the prophet Elisha, but we do have an account of his various prophetic signs, his miracles that he performed. And so, 2 Kings 4 and Matthew 14, the feeding of the 5000 are definitely parallels, and you'd better believe that 1st-century Jews who were present, like the original audience of this sign that's being performed by Jesus, like the apostles or other Jews who knew their scriptures, would see the parallel between what Elisha had done in the Old Testament and what Jesus is doing in the New Testament very, very clearly. In other words, by means of the feeding of the 5000, Jesus is revealing that he is the new Elisha. That's another revelation of his identity which, by the way, makes sense because if you recall elsewhere in the Gospels, how does Jesus identify his prophetic predecessor John the Baptist, right? So just for example, earlier in Matthew, the Gospel of Matthew 11:14, he says to his disciples, "If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." Right? If John the Baptist is a new Elijah, then it makes sense that Jesus, whom John baptizes and then who follows after him, is going to be a new Elisha, right? And just as Elisha did greater things than Elijah, so Jesus is going to do greater things than John the Baptist, right? So there's a prophetic parallel here that plays out at the level of both figures in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

For our purposes, the thing that stands out, though, is that Jesus isn't just a new Elisha, he's a new and greater Elisha. Right? So, Elisha performs a really remarkable miracle. He takes 20 loaves and he feeds 100 men, and there's some leftover. But Jesus goes way above and beyond that because Jesus takes 5 loaves and feeds 5000 men, not including women and children, and there are still some leftover, right? So what we see here, and this is important, is that Jesus's miracles and words in the New Testament not only fulfill the Old Testament, they not only parallel the Old Testament, they transcend it. They go beyond it, and in this case, far beyond it. I mean, it's one thing to feed 100 men with 20 loaves of bread, it's a whole other thing to feed over 5000 people with just five loaves of bread. So Jesus's power exceeds in an extraordinary way the power that was given to Elisha, the miraculous power of Elisha in the Old Testament, right? So that's just the first thing here. There's a very, very powerful Old Testament background to Jesus's actions, and it lays a principle that's going to be very helpful for reading throughout the New Testament.

Whenever you look at Jesus in the New Testament, remember, there's both continuity with the Old Testament, discontinuity with the Old Testament, in terms of something new, and transcendence where he goes beyond what there was in the Old Testament and takes things to a whole new level. All right, that's the gospel for today. What about the Old Testament reading? If you go back to the Old Testament reading, you can see in Isaiah 55... Hold on before I go there, why did I just say what I said? One of the things I've done a lot in my teaching is focus on the Jewish roots, right? The Jewish roots of this, the Jewish roots of that, the Jewish roots of the Eucharist, the Jewish roots of Mary, the Jewish roots of Jesus, all these things. And that's really important, but it is important to recognize that the emphasis on Jewish roots emphasizes continuity, right? These things go back to the Old Testament, but whenever I do that, I'm always trying to make sure that I don't just look at the continuity but also the discontinuity, right? So at the Last Supper, Jesus fulfills the Passover. That's continuity. He's performing, you know, actions that were part of the Jewish Passover. The disciples prepared the Passover meal like they would have prepared any other Passover meal in the 1st century. But then there's also discontinuity so that when Jesus takes the bread, for example, no other Jew in the 1st century would have said, "This is my body" or would have said, "This is my blood" over the wine. So there's discontinuity, there's newness, and in that newness is precisely how Jesus is transcending. He's going beyond the old and establishing something new. He's going to inaugurate a new covenant, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but in his own blood, right? So just keep that in mind as a general principle for typology. Continuity, discontinuity, and transcendence are all part of a proper understanding of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament.

Okay, with that in mind, now turn to Isaiah chapter 55:1-3. The Old Testament reading for today that the Church gives us is, not coincidentally, a prophecy of a banquet, right? So Jesus is feeding a large group of people in the New Testament. What's the background to this? It's a very powerful oracle in the Old Testament that's sometimes tied and interpreted in light of what is known as the messianic banquet, right? So, if you go back to Isaiah 25, I won't go there now, for example, in the book of Isaiah 25, he's going to describe how in the future, in the age of salvation, God is going to make a feast for all peoples, right? He's going to bring

not just Israel, but the nations to the mountain of the Lord. He's going to feed them with fine wine. They're going to have a feast of fine wine where death itself will be swallowed up forever. So this passage in Isaiah 25 kind of sets a foundation for the expectation of what would come to be known as the messianic banquet, the expectation that when the Messiah would come, one of the ways you would know who he was is that he would bring all of the people of God to this wondrous banquet, to this marvelous feast, and he would feed them. So, that's in Isaiah 25. In Isaiah 55, there's a passage which picks up that theme of this future feast and says these words:

“Ho, every one who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in fatness.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.

Notice here, in Isaiah 55, there's this future banquet being described, which you will be able to eat at, but you won't have to pay for, and that's very attractive, right? A lot of times, if you want to have a fine feast, if you want to eat a fine banquet, if you want to go to a fine restaurant and have a feast set before you, it's going to cost you money, right? If you've ever had one of your children get married and you have to pay for the reception, you'll know it costs a lot of money to host a feast, to give a feast to many people. Well, Isaiah is saying no, this future banquet is going to be interesting because it's going to be without money and without price. It's going to be free. You'll be able to eat, you'll be able to drink, you'll be able to

receive the food that God gives without price. And then it goes on to say that this food, notice, is something more than just earthly food because he says, "Incline your ear, and come to me, hear, that your soul may live." So this banquet is going to give spiritual nourishment. It's going to give nourishment to the soul. And somehow, that last line is important. It's tied to God making an everlasting covenant, seems like a new covenant that's going to be tied to the figure of David. So this passage will go on to be a foundation for the expectation that the messianic banquet is going to involve a messianic covenant that's messianic insofar as it's tied to the figure of King David, right? Because the Messiah is going to be a descendant of David, right? He's going to be the Christ, the anointed one, just like David was anointed by the spirit, and Davidic kings were anointed by the spirit, so the banquet, this future banquet of an everlasting covenant is a messianic banquet insofar as it's Davidic.

So, all of that's kind of swirling around in the background to, of course, what Jesus is going to do in the New Testament. So the reason the Church picks this passage about the messianic banquet in the Old Testament is because in the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus does, in part, what this passage describes. He feeds five thousand people with a miraculous banquet of bread, and he doesn't charge them a thing. He doesn't charge them anything. It's a free feast. And that free banquet of miraculous bread of the Messiah is itself an anticipation of the bread that Jesus will freely give at the Last Supper when he establishes the true messianic banquet in his body and his blood, the banquet of the new and everlasting covenant that he, as Messiah, will inaugurate. So it's a very beautiful, powerful, and rich parallelism between the Old Testament text for today and the New Testament Gospel, the gospel reading for today.

And the bridge between the two is Psalm 145, which is chosen because it picks up on this theme of feasting, this theme of dining, and of having a banquet with God. So, if you look at Psalm 145, I'll just pick two verses from it, verses 15 and 16, it says this about God and how he takes care of his people. It says:

The eyes of all look to thee,
and thou givest them their food in due season.
Thou openest thy hand,

thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.

So, what the Church is doing with this Psalm is it's putting on our lips, congregationally, a kind of affirmation of the fact that you promised you would feed us and satisfy us, and in the gospel, you're going to do that through the hands of Jesus and liturgically, very beautiful, he's actually about to give the food that satisfies to the Church through the actual fulfillment of the messianic banquet in the Eucharist itself. So, a beautiful set of readings today for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A.

Now, like I said, I've talked about this passage in other videos about the feeding of the 5000, and perhaps you may recall that in one of them, I criticized the interpretation of this event that has become popular since the 19th century. This is a rationalist interpretation of the text which sees it not as a miracle in the strict sense, like a miraculous multiplication, but rather as what is sometimes called the miracle of sharing. I've talked about this in other videos if you want to check those out. This view, this rationalist interpretation, goes at least as far back as the work of Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus, who was a German, as you might have guessed already, a German scholar who was a rationalist. He didn't believe in miracles and so he tried to reinterpret the feeding of the 5000 as a miracle of sharing, that Jesus prompted people to share with one another, rather than Jesus himself multiplying the bread or multiplying the loaves. And so I had some rather harsh words or a harsh criticism of the interpretation of this passage as the miracle of sharing.

However, I would like to point out, like with so many errors, there's almost always, especially if they're attractive, there's almost always a half-truth built into the error, okay? Otherwise, it wouldn't be appealing. And one of the things I stumbled across in the writings of St. John Chrysostom, a doctor of the early Church, Bishop in Constantinople in the late 4th, early 5th century, he actually interprets the feeding of the 5000 as a miracle of sharing, alright? So I stand corrected. Oh no, actually, I don't, because he, unlike the rationalists, he doesn't deny the miraculous character of it, but Chrysostom does emphasize that there is an element of sharing to this miracle, precisely because, if you look, like we just did, in Isaiah 55, the banquet of God is a banquet of sharing insofar as he gives food and drink to us without money and without cost. Okay, so listen to these words, and just, this is interesting.

John Chrysostom here is going to draw out what we might call the moral meaning of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, and not just its literal sense, but its moral sense. So if you've ever studied the writings of the Church Fathers or medieval writers, you'll know that when they approach any given passage in the Scriptures, they will often talk about the fourfold sense of Scripture, that it can have its literal meaning, but there's also a spiritual meaning to it, which can have three dimensions: some moral implication, some allegorical meaning (this is usually like typology between the Old and New Testaments, like Old Elisha, New Elisha), and then the anagogical meaning, by which the passage points beyond itself to a heavenly meaning, right? So when we're looking at the feeding of the 5000, the literal meaning of the text, for example, would be Jesus takes 5 loaves of bread and he multiplies them and he feeds 5000 people. The allegorical meaning, its spiritual sense, would be Jesus acts as a new Elisha, right? So he does what Elisha does in the Old Testament, but he goes beyond it and he fulfills it, right? He transcends it. And then the anagogical sense of the miracle is that the feeding of the 5000 points forward to the heavenly banquet, the wedding supper of the Lamb, by which God will give us the wine of salvation and the bread of eternal life forever and ever and ever. So that would be all those different meanings. Well, Chrysostom says there is a moral meaning to this miracle as well, and it is tied to God's beneficence, his bounty, his generosity, his sharing. Listen to these words of Saint John Chrysostom from his homilies on Matthew 49:3:

The Lord... wished not only for their bodies to be fed, but also for their souls to be taught... [B]y giving away nothing more but bread and fish, proposing the same food to everyone and sharing it, and by offering one no more than to another, the Lord was teaching humility, self-control, and love. He was also teaching to be equally well disposed to one another, and to hold all possessions in common... The five loaves he broke and gave, and the five multiplied themselves in the hands of the disciples. And not even here does he stop the miracle, but he made them even to exceed; to exceed, not as whole loaves, but as fragments; to signify that of those loaves these were remains, and in order that the absent might learn what had been done. For

this purpose indeed he suffered the multitudes to hunger, *that no one might suppose what took place to be illusion.*²

Wow, isn't that awesome. So notice, Chrysostom, on the one hand, does call this a miracle of sharing. He says that through it, Christ is teaching us to share with others. He's teaching us to offer one another the food of our bounty. Like he says, "by giving away nothing more but bread and fish, proposing the same food to everyone and sharing it...the Lord was teaching humility, self-control, and love." So, this is a miracle sharing. But unlike the German rationalists in the 19th century and 20th century skeptics as well, Chrysostom does not see this as a non-miraculous act. To the contrary, he actually emphasizes that the bread itself multiplies in the hands of the disciples and that it wasn't an illusion. And this is how the fathers interpreted it, right? So, the spiritual sense was based on the literal sense. It didn't undo the literal sense. It didn't take away the literal sense. It actually flows out of the literal sense. So this is another great example of the good old Catholic both/and. Yes, the feeding of the 5000 is a miracle sharing according to St. John Chrysostom. But it's not only a miracle sharing, it's also a miracle of multiplication. And it's precisely that miracle of multiplication that allows us to see in it the miraculous generosity of God through the hands of Jesus Christ and of his apostles.

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 49.3; trans. D. H. Williams and *NPNF2*.