

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

2 Kings 4:42-44

Ps 144

Eph 4:1-6

John 6:1-15

We have a couple of big feasts coming up which will affect the readings we hear on the coming Sundays. In two weeks we have the feast of St Mary MacKillop, and the Australian Bishops have decided that the feast of our first Australian saint is significant enough to trump a Sunday. Then the following Sunday we will have the feast of the Assumption of our Blessed Mother, body and soul, into Heaven. I simply mention this to point out that the cycle of readings we would normally have over the next month or so will be a bit different than normal.

Normally today would be the beginning of four weeks of readings from the sixth chapter of St John's Gospel, starting with today's account of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, and then leading onto the great "Bread of Life" discourse. Of course, all of this ultimately serves as an entrée to the Eucharist, which Jesus made the cornerstone of his chosen community, and which we continue to celebrate two thousand years later.

As such, the Gospel today—and the rest of this part of St John's Gospel—not only relates to the Eucharist, but also to the nature of the community that Jesus was forming. So this is all very relevant to us, because we are part of that community – we are part of his Church. So let's look at today's Gospel a little bit closer, and see what light it shines on the nature of our gathering this morning.

Firstly, we can say that the miraculous feeding is a sign that God has begun to fulfil his promise, which we heard in today's Psalm – "you give them their food in due time ... you grant the desires of all who live."

Of course, the multiplication of the loaves is just a prelude – ultimately, Christ not only offers to satisfy the hunger of our bodies, but—more importantly—also the hunger of our souls – the deep longing in our hearts that only God can fulfil.

Indeed, Jesus points to the final fulfilment of that promise in the Eucharist, in that his actions during this miracle mirror what he did later when he instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He takes the bread; he gives a blessing of thanksgiving; he breaks the bread; and he gives it away.

In the Eucharist, Christ feeds us with the living bread of his body, and, as we heard in the second reading, those of us who receive the Eucharist are subsequently made *one body* with the Lord. This is a truly amazing thing – this deeply intimate union

with Christ affects our very being, and it forms the basis of the community that we each share as members of his Church.

This leads us to a very important point – namely, *that our communion with God comes before our communion with each other*. Our union with each other comes from and through our union with Christ, most especially in the Eucharist.

Some people speak of the miracle in our Gospel today and say that what really happened is that the crowd had their hearts opened and were inspired to share food that they had already brought with them. Now, sharing is obviously a wonderful thing, but this view of things is an insufficient foundation for the kind of community that Jesus was calling into being. Indeed, as this passage continues in the coming weeks, we'll see that Jesus essentially goes out of his way to thin out the hangers-on – those who don't get the deeper significance of this miracle today, and who are just hanging around for the free feed.

Jesus is doing something much more than teaching us to “play nice” with each other – he is forming a community whose bonds will reach deeper than those of nationality or even family, and whose union will break the limits of both space and time. We are not just a group that has been inspired by Jesus to form community together. Our connection with each other goes much deeper than that – *because it goes through our respective connection to Christ*. Our *communion* with each other stems from our *common union* with Christ.

We are united in our common love of another *in* our common love of the Lord, and in our *being loved* and nourished by him, most especially in the Eucharist. Many times when I'm praying before the Blessed Sacrament in Adoration, I feel a remarkable bond with the other people there—often complete strangers—and without saying a word. It's like, “Oh, you love him too!” We recognise that we each love him, and we each want to please him.

The parents here know something about this – recall the added depth in your mutual love towards your spouse that accompanied the birth of your firstborn. Not only do you love each other, but now you are also united in your common love for this child. Your love for each other went to a whole other level through your *mutual love* for another.

Or think about the bond that some of you might have with fellow fans of your favourite sporting team. Think of how you can be passionately united with complete strangers over a great win. Well, in the Church we're dealing with Almighty God, so multiply that by infinity!

We aren't just a community for the sake of being a community – there are plenty of others groups for that. We are drawn together by our mutual love of God and

our desire to please him, and this has dramatic implications for how we relate to each other. In some respects you and I barely know each other, yet here we are, about to do this most intimate thing together – sharing in the Body of Christ, and in so doing renewing our connection with that Body.

Of course, we're still human, and so we will continue to rub up against our fellow parishioners and frustrate each other from time to time, as all human beings are inclined to do. Maybe it's the person behind you at Mass who sings out of tune, or the visiting family who are seated in the spot where you normally sit; perhaps it's the office volunteer whose mannerisms you find annoying, or the parish group who have set up in the room that your group normally uses; or maybe it's the blogger online whose views on theology or liturgy or parish life you find problematic. And yet the intimate nature of our union with each other (through our common union with Christ) means that we really must strive to relate to our fellow believers with genuine Christian charity, and to care for each other as much as we would care for our own limbs or vital organs.

Our God is so good, and he nourishes us so abundantly with the true Body and Blood of his Son. As we kneel before the mystery of such unearned generosity, let us resolve once more to make our lives worthy of such a great calling. This is our *duty* and our *privilege* as members of the Body of Christ.