

CORPUS CRISTI– 23rd June 2019

THEY ALL ATE AND WERE SATISFIED - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 9,11-17

When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." And they did so, and had them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

On the solemnity of Corpus Christi the liturgy presents to us the evangelist Luke chapter 9, verses 11-17. Jesus and his disciples went to Bethsaida, outside the Jewish territory. But when the crowds heard this "... *the crowds learned it, they followed him.*" The crowds feel attracted to Jesus because they feel in his message the response of God to the need for fullness that each person carries within. "...*he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God...*" Jesus does not tell them about the kingdom of Israel. Jesus did not come to restore the kingdom of Israel, but to inaugurate the kingdom of God, a kingdom without borders because God's love does not tolerate any barrier.

"...and cured those who had need of healing." Here in the face of evil, in the face of illness, Jesus has no words of consolation, but actions that heal, which eliminate this evil. This is an effect of the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God the good and well-being of man are in the first place.

"Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came..." The evangelist points out a difference. While the crowds follow Jesus - and Jesus had invited his disciples, the twelve, to follow him - the twelve are far away from him, they are almost at a safe distance, they must approach him, but they approach him for a reason that is negative ... *"...and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place."*

The twelve treat Jesus in a naïve way as if he did not know that he was in a deserted area, that there was no food, so their concern is to send people away. People are not said to have tired of listening to Jesus' teaching, they are the disciples who think only of themselves.

"But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." The meaning is twofold. In addition to the obvious "get them food yourself" is the meaning "give yourself as food". The evangelist is here anticipating what the meaning of the Eucharist will be, where Jesus, the son of God, makes himself bread, food of life, because those who welcome him, eat him and assimilate him, are then capable of becoming themselves bread, food of life for others.

But here is the objection of the twelve. *“They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food ..”* There is a contrast between the invitation of Jesus "to give", that is "to share", and the mentality of the disciples, "to buy". They have not yet understood Jesus' message of sharing. *“..for all these people.”* Literally the population, and it is a derogatory term. The apostles see this whole crowd following Jesus almost with annoyance. *“For there were about five thousand men.”* Why this number? Because the primitive Christian community, according to the Acts of the Apostles, was composed of about five thousand people. The evangelist wants to say that this is the action that constitutes the community.

And he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down..” While the apostles used the imperative "Send them away, leave them", Jesus responds with another contrary imperative: "Let them sit", literally lie down. At festive and solemn meals, people ate lying on cots, but who ate like this? The men who had servants who provided for them. Then Jesus asks the community of disciples to make those present feel like lords because they put themselves at their service.

“...in groups of about fifty each.” There are many numbers in this passage of the gospel. The numbers of the Bible always have a figurative and symbolic meaning, never mathematical. Fifty is the action of the Spirit. Pentecost is the fiftieth day, so fifty and its multiples indicate the action of the Spirit

“And they did so, and had them all sit down.” So all the participants here are treated as lords. And here the evangelist anticipates what will be Jesus' gestures at the last supper. *“And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven(in communion with God) and said a blessing over them.”* giving thanks, making it clear that we no longer possess this bread and fishes but that they are a gift from God and the gifts of God must be shared to multiply the effects of his creative action. *“Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.”* The disciples are not the owners of this bread, but they are servants whose job it is to distribute this bread to the crowd. It is not for them to decide who is worthy and who is not to take this bread, to participate or not at this table, their task is only to distribute

The omission of a very important rite in the Jewish meal stands out: purification. Why doesn't Jesus ask the crowd to purify themselves to be worthy to eat this meal? The evangelist anticipates what is the great novelty of Jesus: while religion teaches that man must purify himself in order to be worthy of welcoming the Lord, with Jesus it is welcoming the Lord that purifies him and makes him worthy of him.

The evangelist concludes: *“ And they all ate and were satisfied .”* When we share there is abundance for everyone. *“ And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces”* It is the last of the numbers that appeared in this gospel. Why twelve? Twelve is the number of the tribes that make up Israel. The evangelist wants to say that the problem of hunger is solved by sharing the bread. As long as people take for themselves, save for themselves, there is injustice and there is hunger, when what one has is not considered as exclusively one's own but is shared to multiply the creative action of the Father, this creates satiety and abundance.