

THEY ALL ATE AND WERE SATISFIED – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 14.13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But 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 said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them 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.

The episode of the dividing of the loaves and fishes is so important that it is told by all four of the evangelists. They tell it because in this episode not only is there a sign performed by the Lord, but in it is seen and anticipated the Eucharistical supper. Therefore the whole phrase is an anticipation – and an insight – into the profound meaning of Jesus' Eucharistical supper.

For this the evangelist puts indications in the text to help understand that – attention! – he is not telling of a simple event of fact, but transmits a theological truth. Here is why in this episode, we find at chapter 14, 13-21 in Matthew's Gospel, that the evangelist indicates the same moment of the last supper.

He says that in the evening the disciples came to Him, there is a crowd that had followed Jesus and had begun a new exodus, a new liberation, and the disciples, that are not in agreement with the people and do not understand them, ask Jesus to let them go and find something to eat. They have not yet accepted the spirit of the beatitudes, and of sharing.

And Jesus replies, and here there is the profound indication of the meaning of the Eucharist, “*«They need not go away; »*”, and to those that have used the verb ‘to buy’, Jesus replies with the verb ‘to

give'. There is no need to buy, but there is to share. But the particular form of the verb used by the evangelist to express this phrase has a particular meaning.

Jesus says: “*«...you give them something to eat. »*”, literally ‘you must give them something to eat’. It is the meaning of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist Jesus is made bread, food of life, because those that are able to welcome it are able by themselves to make bread, food of life for the others. It is not enough to give bread to the people, but to be able to make yourself bread for the people. Here is why the evangelist uses this expression: “*...you give them something to eat. ”*

This is the meaning of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist bread is not only given, but you make yourself bread for the others. The disciples reply that what they have is not enough, in fact they say there are only “*«...five loaves here and two fish. »*”. That adds up to seven, which in the Jewish symbology, means all that they had. When one keeps for oneself that which one has it seems not enough; when it is shared it creates abundance.

In fact Jesus asks it to be brought to Him, and now there are significant indications of the Eucharist. The first thing that Jesus orders is for the crowd to sit down. Why does Jesus give orders? Because there is resistance. And why does He order the crowd to sit down? Can't they eat how they want, sitting or standing?

In the festive or solemn meals, one ate reclining on a sort of bed as was the Roman custom. But who could eat in this way? Only those that had servants to serve them. Here then is the precious indication that the evangelist gives us: the Eucharist serves to make the people feel like “lords” (with full dignity). Therefore the disciples, who are free persons, put themselves at the service of others: those that are considered servants of society, the poor, the cast-offs, the excluded, to allow them to recuperate their full dignity.

And why must Jesus give orders? Because there is resistance. The people like to be overpowered, do not like freedom. And the evangelist here presents us with the same gestures that Jesus will perform in the last supper. “*...taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven..*” meaning divine communication, “*... and said a blessing*”, to bless means that what you have is no more in your possession, but is a received gift, and as such, shared to multiply the effects of the creation.

“*Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples,*” the same gestures that Jesus will do in the last supper when taking the bread, gives a blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to His disciples, “*..and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*” The disciples are not the owners of this bread, they are not the administrators, but they are the servants. It is their task to take this bread, that represents the Eucharist, and distribute it to the crowd, without any conditions and without any limits.

Above all the absence of a command from Jesus stands out. Why does Jesus not command the crowd to purify themselves? Before eating there was an observance, compulsory, that was not a simple observation of hygiene, it was not enough to have washed the hands; the hands must be purified following special observations and special prayers. Well then, Jesus every time He found Himself at

lunch or supper – and the suppers and lunches in the Gospels always anticipate the Eucharist – never asks or imposes the washing of one’s hands.

What is the meaning of this? It is not true that mankind must purify himself to take part at the banquet of the Lord, but on the contrary it is the participation at the banquet of the Lord that purifies him. This is a great novelty brought by Jesus. Mankind must not be worthy to participate at the banquet, but it is the participation at the banquet that makes him worthy. For this Jesus makes Himself bread and asks the disciples “to be given”, distributed to the crowd without putting conditions.

They eat until they are full, and twelve baskets are left over. The number twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel, and the evangelist indicates that through sharing – and not hoarding – hunger is resolved for all the people. And here at the end a precious detail. “*And those who ate were about five thousand men...*”, The evangelist refers here to the same amount of people that made up the primitive Christian community, as written in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 4 , 4.

But why exactly five thousand? The multiples of fifty in the Bible indicates the actions of the Spirit. The prophets, guided by the Spirit, went in groups of fifty. Pentecost means nothing more than fiftieth, the fiftieth day after Easter, and it is the day in which the Spirit descends in the Christian community,. No longer an external law to be observed, but the Spirit, an internal strength to accept. Therefore the multiples of fifty indicate the Spirit’s actions.

So the evangelist through these numbers, wants to make understood that, with the bread, the Spirit was communicated as the base of the gift. And at the end, a detail “*...besides women and children.*” Why this detail? Because in the cult of the synagogue the celebration could start only when ten adult males were present; the synagogue could be full of women and children, but until there were ten adult males the ceremony could not begin.

So given this indication ‘ with counting the women and children’, it is a way of counting the participants in the synagogue, the evangelist wants to make understood that with Jesus, in this episode of the sharing of the loaves, a new cult is born. The new cult does not take place anymore in the synagogue, but where ever the practice of the beatitudes exists, the generous sharing. The new cult does not come from mankind towards God, but comes from God and is aimed at mankind, because Matthew’s Jesus is the God with us, that asks to be welcomed because with him and like him humanity goes to be food of life, of strength, towards every man that is in need.