

Sunday Homily

8TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

2 AUGUST 2020

YEAR A

“And all ate and were filled.”

Matthew 14:20

Illustration

Much anxiety surrounds food, even in societies where food is plentiful and starvation is rare. There are regular food scares, sugars and fats are frequently seen as suspect, adverse to health. Various bacteria hit the headlines, salmonella and listeria raise their ugly heads. Medical conditions such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia affect thousands of people. Food, essential for life and meant to be enjoyed, becomes instead a threat, causing discomfort, even ill health. Where food is scarce, finding enough of anything becomes an overriding responsibility.

In the scriptures food has rich associations: from the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, where food symbolised wisdom and temptation, to manna in the desert, where it symbolised God’s provision for his people. The Passover meal was a vivid commemoration of rescue from slavery. The Maccabees’ refusal to eat the flesh of the pig signified their faithfulness to the Law, even in the face of death. In the New Testament, Jesus is frequently shown eating: having a meal with Martha and Mary, relaxing with friends; eating with Zacchaeus, where Jesus demonstrates his regard for people often overlooked. Dining with tax collectors and sinners is a statement of who the Son of Man came to save. And in the miracles of the loaves and fishes, food is a sign of blessing and abundance.

Gospel Teaching

There was no absolute need to feed the people gathered by the shore of the lake. Even though they were in a lonely place the disciples suggested dispersing the crowd to the villages to buy their own food. But Jesus suggests otherwise; he responds to this need, among their other needs. Although he had intended to withdraw from the public gaze to ponder the Baptist’s death, he took pity on the people and healed their sick. And, having healed them, he responded to another immediate, pressing need. They were hungry and they needed to be fed. Once again, the presence of Christ is a blessing in more ways than one. From meagre resources a huge crowd is satisfied with plenty left over. Indeed, twelve baskets, which signified abundance for each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Where people are anxious, Jesus brings reassurance. Where they are confused, he brings enlightenment. Where they are sick, he brings healing. And where they are hungry, he brings bread. It is clear that the ministry of Christ is not just to the spirit or the soul, but to the whole person. He is not just food for the spirit, but food for the body also. The Good News is not merely an idea but a complete renewal of life.

So where there is anxiety about food, about what is safe to eat and what is not safe; when there is worry about whether there will be enough on the plate; where food seems to threaten as well as nourish, Jesus' use of food points the way. Here he brings together much of the symbolism associated with food. As in the desert of old, food here represents God's provision for people. Food represents deliverance and Jesus' concern for the marginalised, those whom the Son of Man came to save. In the taking of the bread, the blessing, breaking and distributing, food points to the sacrifice of Christ and to his abiding presence in the Eucharist.

Application

Food represents an opportunity in the Gospel of Christ. As in the Garden of Eden, it suggests the desirability of true wisdom and the necessity of resisting temptation. When we are anxious about the future, the provision of manna in the desert reminds us of God's generosity and care. Passover reminds us of the saving power of God, and the story of the Maccabees is an example of perseverance in the face of extreme adversity. Jesus eating with Martha and Mary demonstrates the value he placed upon friendship and fellowship. His meal with Zacchaeus, with tax collectors and sinners, makes clear that every person is worthy of respect. And the miracle of the loaves and fishes is a rich reminder of the mission of Jesus to proclaim the kingdom, to heal, to nourish and to bless.

The greatest meal of all, the Last Supper, brings together all the symbolism of food in the ministry of Jesus. When anxious, hungry, and in any kind of need, we remember how the Lord provides and how we too should provide for others in his name.