

18TH SUNDAY A 2008 AUGUST 3, 2008

FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

ISAIAH 55: 1-3 ROMANS 8:35, 37-39

MATTHEW 14:13-21



Most of the developed world today seems to be trying to free itself of carbohydrates while much of the rest of the world is on the brink of starvation. With the *Atkins Diet* you have no carbohydrates, with the *South Beach Diet* you have some, and with *Nutrasystem* you have only the good carbs determined by the glycemic index, whatever that is. Yet for centuries, no for millennia, carbohydrates in the form of bread have been the number one staple of the human diet. Every culture has had its own particular kind of bread which was considered the staff of life. And, if you've done any traveling in Italy you know that each area, indeed each city has its own specific bread that varies in taste and texture from that of any other town or city. Like most Americans of my generation I grew up on white bread or box bread as we used to call it, but in our house such bread was only found on the table after we had eaten all the light or dark rye bread that we bought, along with bagels and Kaiser rolls every Saturday evening at Levin's bakery as we walked home from my grandmother's. To this day, as you can tell, bread continues to remain one of my favorite foods be it wheat or rye, light or dark, plain or toasted, with butter or without, although I prefer it with, bread is simply a food that I refuse to live without.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah today is an invitation to a great feast for all those who are hungry and thirsty. Grain, wine, milk seems to be flowing like water from a fountain. Our translation tells us that we shall "delight in rich fare." Yet, even our translation seems effected by dieting culture for what is translated here as "you shall eat well" should in realty be translated as "you shall delight in fatness." Yet, this is not simply an invitation to sate our human appetites, it is also an invitation to come to the Lord and there to be fed spiritually not simply the body but also the soul. In this respect "bread" has been of particular interest as a symbol of God's Love in the Old Testament. Yahweh provided the people with manna in the desert. The memory of that gift remained in the consciousness of the people and becomes a refrain in many of the Psalms.

Today's Gospel is one of the most familiar of all of Jesus' miracles. The early Church undoubtedly placed great importance on the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes for it is

found not only in each of the four Gospels, but in both Matthew and Mark it is treated twice. Certainly this miracle has Eucharistic implication, but even though it speaks of both fish and loaves, Matthew seems to focus on the bread. In addition, certain words and actions; looking up to heaven, blessing, breaking, and giving, have become imbedded in the prayer of Consecration in the Roman Canon. When we hear about these words and actions in Matthew we cannot but think about the words we hear and the actions we see during our Eucharist as they in turn reflect the Lord's Last Supper. Very early in our history Christians also saw in the very overabundance of the multiplication of the loaves, that is twelve baskets filled with fragments, a sign that our Eucharist perpetuates that gesture of this Miracle. In the course of two millennia Jesus has continually fed the hungry crowds with His Body and Blood and the Eucharist holds out the promise that He will never fail to do so.

The guarantee of that continued Gift is spoken of beautifully in our reading from the *Letter to the Romans*. Paul's eloquence here matches that of any of the Roman orators of his time. *"What can separate us from the Love of Christ?" What can separate us from the Love of Christ which is the Gift of Himself to nourish and strengthen us?* Paul enumerates events from his own experience that might have threatened to do so: anguish, distress, famine, nakedness, peril, or even the sword which will eventually be the instrument of his death. Yet, all these threats come to nothing because of Christ's Love for him. Nothing, he goes on to say, not the natural course of things, the supernatural powers, the unknown, nothing will ever have the ability to separate us from Christ if we accept His Love and offer ours in return.

So, our readings today are all about Eucharist in one way or another. They are all about being feed by God not only physically but more importantly spiritually. They are about God's desire to give us nourishment, and that we in some way become what we eat.

We cannot ignore Jesus' words to His Apostles, "Give them something to eat yourselves." Concern for the crowd, tired and hungry as they are, was not enough. He called His Apostles and us beyond mere concern to the point that we actually do something. We know that among the other great problems of our world, hunger has been, is, and will continue to be one of the greatest concerns. As the price of food rises ever higher for us as Americans, imagine what is happening in those areas of Africa where drought and war have been a source of devastation and hunger for years. *Is the feeding of the men, women and children of our world a possibility when it seems that even the richest nations of our planet can*

expect future difficulty in feeding their own people because of the inflated price of energy, and the transformation of farmland from a source of food to a source of energy?

“Give them something to eat yourselves” should echo in our ears not as an impossible comment made by the Lord, but as an actual instruction on what we should be doing as Christians. For years we have been paying our farmers not to raise various crops, a policy that I am sure makes some kind of economic sense, but which does not make sense if we think about the future food needs of people all over the globe. Jesus’ command to “give them something to eat yourselves” is not a political or an economic necessity, it is a moral necessity. It is a moral necessity that we as Christians need to address even if it seems impossible. As we have become a progressively more affluent as a nation, the percentage of money our government gives to help the poor and hungry of the world has gone down. If our government does not offer such assistance, then we have the obligation to find other ways to feed the hungry. And, there are many ways available to us with *Catholic Relief Services* and *Bread For the World* being only two.

While answering the physical hunger of the world’s poorest may seem most dire, we are also called to answer the spiritual hunger of men and women whether they are materially poor or wealthy. That may seem even more daunting than answering their physical needs. Many if not most feel somewhat unprepared to offer others spiritual food. Yet, the Church has for centuries provided us with ways to do just that. They are the perhaps long forgotten *Spiritual Works of Mercy*: convert sinners, instruct the ignorant, advise the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, forgive injuries, and pray for the living and the dead. *How do we live these Spiritual Works of Mercy in our lives?*

Most of us don’t often find ourselves in public settings where we can condemn moral evil and promote good although that sometimes happens. And, in truth, to accuse others of being sinners usually causes more harm than good. For most of us the conversion of sinners suggests that we live our faith authentically by giving good example, and by having the courage to confront personal evil whenever we meet it. Our lives, in other words, become examples that draw others to the good and away from the evil.

Instructing the ignorant refers of course to those who are unaware of Christ and His teachings, or even members of the Church who do not know what the Church teaches. If we are well informed then we need to share that faith knowledge, but we also need to be careful that we do not spread misinformation and mislead those who are seeking truth.

Advising the doubtful means that we help others as far as we can to make good judgments. Everyone needs a sympathetic listener now and then when it comes to spiritual and faith matters, and sometimes we must be willing to be that listener for others even when we need give no advice.

Comforting the sorrowful means that we as Christians need to have a sympathetic and caring attitude towards those who carry a burden of grief and pain. We need to have the compassion of Christ in dealing with such men and women just as Jesus compassionately dealt with the sick and grieving of his own day.

To bear wrongs patiently may be the most difficult of the Spiritual Works of Mercy. It seems that whenever we are injured our natural reaction is to seek justice and at times revenge. But, we are called like Christ to offer no resistance to those who hurt us, and indeed to turn the other cheek. Here too, it is all a matter of example.

Forgiveness of injuries is also difficult for us, but like Christ we are called to forgive just as He forgave those who crucified Him. We need also to remember that forgiveness of our sins depends on our willingness to forgive others.

To pray for the living and the dead is to invoke God's blessing on others. To pray for the dead is an expression of our Christian hope and belief that we are bound together by a bond that cannot be broken by death and that living or dead we are all part of the Body of Christ.

The Spiritual Acts of Mercy are a way for us to feed and nourish our brothers and sisters spiritually in the very ways that Christ did when He walked this earth. They are ways for us to become bread broken and wine poured out for others: giving as we have been given and loving as we have been loved. Giving them, as Christ commanded, food that is ourselves.