

THE BIBLICAL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF HUNGER IN THE WORLD

(A Reflection for the 17th Sunday Yr B, 25.07.21 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

Dear friends, today we are reflecting on the theme, “The Biblical Approach to Addressing the Problem of Hunger in the World.” Hunger and poverty have continued to be the single biggest catalyst to instability and lack of peace in many regions of the world. Poverty indeed dehumanizes and makes life hardly worth living and therefore easily dispensable at any given instigation. Therefore, our chances of advancing peace and stability in the world are largely dependent on our success in diminishing the problem of hunger and poverty.

Today, the readings of the liturgy offer us a model for confronting this ever ancient and ever contemporary problem. In the 1st Reading (2 Kings 4:42-44), we read of Elisha’s feeding of a hundred disciples of the prophets with just twenty loaves of barley bread and some fresh grain brought to him as bread of the first harvest, in accordance with the practice of bringing the first fruit to men of God (priests or prophets; cf. Lev 23:9-21).

In the preceding passage, we are told that it was a time of famine and Elisha had earlier fed them with a stew made from wild gourds. While eating, the disciples of the prophets had stomach upsets and cried out: “O man of God, there is death in the pot”, hence they couldn’t eat it (4:38-40). Elisha resolved this problem by asking his servant who had prepared the meal to fetch some flour and put in the pot, an intervention that made the stew finally edible.

Apparently, they weren’t satisfied, hence, when this man from a town identified as Baal-shalishah brought the gift, the prophet asked that it be given to the needy disciples of the prophets. But his servant, like we would do, tried to resist on grounds that the food was too little for hundred men. He said, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” (v. 43a). But the prophet insisted, “Give it to the people and let them eat”, backing his stands with a scriptural quotation: “For thus said the Lord: ‘They shall eat and have some left over’” (v.43b). And indeed, when they had eaten, they had some left over in accordance with the word of the Lord (v.44).

Clearly, this calls us to make ours the responsibility of making the first little but necessary step, instead of doing absolutely nothing, confident that the grace of God will work over the imperfect nature of the effort we have begun and raise it up to the point of satisfaction and perfection beyond our imagination.

When we take the first steps in caring for our hungry, poorer and more socio-economically disadvantaged brothers and sisters, we are not only doing an act of charity towards them but also towards ourselves, since, our destinies are inextricably connected. In fact, in the 2nd Reading (Eph 4:1-6) which is the beginning of the exhortative aspect of this letter on unity and reconciliation, the author underscores the fact that we share one and the same destiny: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (vv.4-6). Hence, the author strongly calls on believers, in reality, he pleads with them to humbly, gently and patiently bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of Spirit through the bond of peace (vv.1-3).

The Gospel Reading comes from the first part of John 6 (6:1-15) which is the longest chapter of the Gospel of John, read uninterruptedly from the 17th up to the 21st Sunday of this liturgical year circle. Today's passage tells us about Jesus' feeding of a multitude which constitutes his fourth sign or deed of power in the Gospel of John, after turning water to wine at the wedding Feast at Cana (2:1-12), healing the son of a royal official living in Capernaum (4:46-54) and the lame man at the pool of the Sheep Gate (Beth-zatha) in Jerusalem on the Sabbath day (5:1-9).

The story has a lot of similarities with the story of Elisha's feeding of a multitude (a hundred men) in 2 Kings 4 which we have as today's 1st Reading. There are two levels of disciples in both cases: the ones immediately working with the master (inner-circle disciples), and those who are more general followers. The inner-circle disciple of Elisha is described as his servant (4:38) or attendant (4:43) and is charged with the responsibility of preparing a stew of wild gourds for the hungry followers described as "disciples of the prophets" (4:38). It is this inner circle disciple who is slow to give food to the hungry followers on the grounds that the it would be too little (4:43).

Similarly, in the Gospel Jesus has his inner circle disciples and a large hungry followership and asks one of his inner-circle disciples, Philip to figure out how to get food for the hungry crowd of followers. Philip, like Elisha's servant, expresses the idea of not having enough to feed the crowd: "Two hundred denarii [an equivalence of six months' wages] would not buy bread enough for each of them to get a little" (Jn 6:7). Another disciple, Andrew said: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (6:9). Jesus would take these five barley loaves and fish, say a thanksgiving prayer and distribute them to the seated crowd. Like in the Elisha scenario, they all ate to satisfaction and there was left over amounting to about twelve baskets (6:10-13).

Clearly, this story is told with the Elisha story at the background, as if to show that Jesus was a prophet like Elisha. The episode in fact concludes on this note: "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come in the world'" (6:14). However, Jesus is not just like Elijah but even greater, since Elijah fed only a hundred men with a combination of the stew of gourds, twenty loaves of bread and some fresh grain, while Jesus feeds an unquantified number described simply as a large crowd, with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

In both cases, nonetheless, we are dealing with overcoming the tendency to think that we can share what we have only when we have enough, a logic displayed by Elisha's servant and the two disciples of Jesus. However, both Elisha in the 1st Reading and Jesus in the Gospel dismiss this logic. Their insistence that the disciples give the multitudes from the little they had, makes the point that not having enough must not be a pretext not to help those who are weaker, poorer and hungry. In the final analysis, generosity, sensitivity, compassion, charity and solidarity which inspire us to share, are qualities of the heart, not of the pocket.

The readings today, therefore, strongly invite us to imbibe a spirituality that sees human effort, imperfect as it may be, as something God does not despise or dismiss but rather, as a collaboration God encourages, welcomes, takes up, transforms and perfects. The God of the

Bible comes through most often as one who makes little things great than as one who makes things out of nothing.