

St Pius & St Anthony 17th Sunday Ordinary Time Year B2

As kids we came up with some strange games. One time when I walked into our kitchen, my brother, his friend and my cousin were in the middle of a contest of who could eat a whole sandwich slice of white Bunny Bread the fastest. Sounds easy but when you factor in, that such soft bread tends to stick badly to the roof of the mouth and that one rule was that you couldn't drink anything with it, this challenge wasn't as easy as it sounded. We never found out that day who was winner, because when my mom came in shortly after me, she stopped it immediately, really upset and telling us how dangerous that was, as we could easily choke to death on the wad of dough stuck in our throat! That memory came to mind for me back around the 4th July weekend, when a controversy blew up, over the popular Nathan's Hot Dog eating contest in Coney island. It's organizers barred not just any player, but the 16 time champ winner Joey Chestnut, from competing – disqualifying him because he signed a promotion deal to advertise the brand 'Impossible Foods' which makes 'fake meat' substitutes, such as plant based hot dogs. So, it was not just us kids, but adults play such games, too!

But speaking of 'Impossible' foods, today's gospel gives us quite a meal to marvel over: the multiplication of loaves and fishes by Jesus. This miracle of the feeding of five thousand, starting with only five loaves and two fish, ranks right up there as Jesus' most commonly remembered miracle (it is the only one by specific detail that is found in all four gospels). I place right alongside it, His miracle at Cana in John chapter 2, where he transformed water into wine. And not just a little wine, but He produced between 120-180 gallons of wine (John 2:6-7) that day from water. Thinking of such a full menu buffet of food **and** drink when considering both of these miracles, it raises a question in my mind, as to why we do not hear about any detail here about what the 5,000 drank with the multiplied loaves and fish. The crowd of Jesus' time, may not have been as hung up on having 'liquid refreshments' with their meals as we might today. But it does seem to be a glaring oversight that we don't hear anything about what they drank. Now of course, I realize that they are sitting on banks of the Sea of Galilee. So an easy assumption is that they are staring at a whole vista of water (*even though some people question that, saying 'but that's a sea, all salty'- but the Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater Lake way up north. Now the Dead Sea far down the Jordan river south is a salt-saturated body of water- but its salt comes from the salt bed deposit it sits on and the desert salts it picks up flowing south*) But despite no mention of water, I am certain they do have fresh liquid to drink because of the unique detail that John does include. John 6, verse 10 reports that, "Jesus said, *"Have the people recline."*

Now there was a **great deal of grass** in that place.” Why the mention of a grassy hillside? And not just grass but a ‘**great deal**’ of grass? Well, how could such grass, and so much, grow without source of water? But I find deeper meaning here too, with the mention of grass for them to ‘recline on’.

This is John’s account, but both Mark and Matthew suggest that Jesus’ miraculous feeding here is provoked by His sight of large, hungering multitudes. Matt 14:14 tells us “Jesus saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them” and Mark 6:34 tells us His “heart was moved with compassion for them, for they were like **sheep without a shepherd**”. That reference-Shepherd! That is what I’m after: “The great deal of GRASS detail makes us think, of course, of the 23rd Psalm. The Good Shepherd feeds his flock, leading them to the ‘greenest of pastures and the most refreshing waters” (Ps 23:2) So, the otherwise scattered detail of ‘great deal of grass’ is very important because of suggestion of ‘its abundant food for the sheep to graze on’. Jesus the Good Shepherd provides abundant food and drink to nourish-feed His sheep - all of us!

This miraculous feeding story is filled with details, accentuating the ‘abundance’ God provides us. John’s gospel has a whole chapter (10) dedicated to Jesus portrayed as the Good Shepherd. In John 10, we learn that the Shepherd Jesus, “came so that they (we-sheep) might have life and ***have it more abundantly***” (John 10:10). Several of the details that bring this home for us, is that the feeding was of 1) 5,000 men (Jn 6:10) 2) that they reclined- indicates that they are going to be there a while until they are fully satisfied (Jn 6:10) 3) they ate ‘as much of the fish as they wanted’ (Jn 6:11) 4) there were even leftovers (Jn 6:12) 5) and enough leftovers, to fill 12 wicker basket full (Jn 6:13)! That is picture of abundance! God provides for His people-His sheep. (Isn’t this miracle a proof-positive demonstration of what Jesus promised the apostles a couple weeks ago, when He sent them out on mission, with nothing-He said He would provide for them, along the way, all that they needed (Mk 6:8), and He does!

Yet also, this miracle’s lesson for me is how Jesus treasures the small things among us and uses little unlikely instruments to deliver His abundance. Notice that the starter food of this miracle is just a simple ‘five loaves and two fish’, and it isn’t the powerful fisher-**MEN** (with all of their nets and boats) like Peter, James, John that produce that starter-food base of this miracle. No, it was an otherwise overlooked, unnamed ‘little boy’ in crowd (Jn 6:9). Jesus uses the ‘little among us’ to deliver His abundance to us. And like the best of hosts, Jesus pays attention to the little details of service. Notice that He had the crowds sit: Like a good host seating people quickly, to make them comfortable. And serving not just a minimal basic staple like bread alone, but bread with meat-the fish. *(It is interesting to recall*

the first diet-specific complaint of ancient Israelites in desert with Moses- they whined over only having manna bread-they demanded meat-‘Where’s the Beef?’ in Numbers 11:32-And God sent them Quail!). Being the greatest of hosts, Jesus is sensitive to the small things of comfort and hospitality. And a final proof of this, is how he clears the tables of dishes, with concern that ‘nothing be wasted’ and orders His disciples to ‘gather up the fragments’ (Jn 6:12). The small things are so significant to Jesus. Is it any surprise that He will teach us later about the great things accomplished by even tiny ‘mustard seed’ faith (Matt 17:20), and that “the greatest among you is the least’ (Matt 23:11) and that to enter kingdom you must become as a ‘child’ (Matt 18:3). Like this generous, servant child, offering even what little gift he has to the ‘Glory and Service of God’. Jesus celebrates the small, and lifts up the least. And maybe overlooked above all in this story, is the little detail, in the center of this story that Jesus accepted the child’s gift, and took a moment, to ‘**give thanks**’ (Jn 6:11). Jesus embodies gratitude, and expresses thanks to the Father, for everything, especially every LITTLE thing. It is easy to give thanks for great things, but we must be just as thankful for small things. When we know it comes from God’s hand, and we take time to offer Him thanks, the small becomes great!