

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 55:1-3

Isaiah 40:1 through 55:13, also known as Deutero- (2nd) Isaiah, has been called the Book of Comfort. The prophet places ancient traditions in a cosmic setting, so that the new exodus levels mountains or strikes flowing water in the heights. The Mosaic covenant is expanded into a world-wide covenant by mentioning the covenants with Noah and with Abraham and Sarah. The author sees the garden of paradise emerge before his eyes. The spirit of the liturgy breaks forth into new life through his hymns, laments, and proclamation of the word. On the 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time (four weeks ago) we heard the closing words of the conclusion of the Book of Comfort. Today we hear the opening words of this same conclusion.

[Thus says the LORD:]^{55:1} All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! ² Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare.

The Bible often evokes the banquet symbol to describe God's love. The Passover out of Egypt is celebrated with a banquet as well as the Sinai covenant (Exodus 24:5, 11). The abundance of the world to come is often portrayed as a banquet (Isaiah 25:6; 65:11-15). In the banquet in today's reading, all are invited to this eschatological banquet: the only condition is a thirst for God.

³ Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life.

The source of life is to be found in God's word.

I will renew with you the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David.

God assures Israel that she will receive the full "benefits" of the everlasting covenant made long ago with David. "Everlasting" does not mean a covenant beginning now and lasting forever, but one bringing the promises of the distant past to present fulfillment. David had conquered nations but his successors could not maintain his kingdom; the Davidic hopes are now secured as all nations beholding God's redemptive power within Israel hurry to join her ranks. The sacred author promotes the Davidic dynasty; David is honored merely as leader and commander, whereas God is declared king (Isaiah 40:9) and Cyrus the anointed one (Isaiah 45:1).

2nd Reading - Romans 8:35, 37-39

Today we finish our study of Romans chapter eight. As you will recall, last week we heard the basis of the doctrine of predestination. We now hear how Christ bears witness for us. To better understand the context. We will begin our reading at verse 28 and continue straight through to verse 39.

²⁸ We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? ³³ Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. ³⁴ Who will condemn? It is Christ (Jesus) who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?

Notice he doesn't list the ten commandments; he lists other things which can lead to apostasy. None of the dangers or troubles of life can make the true Christian forget the love of Christ which is made known to us in His death and resurrection.

"None of these can separate believers; nothing can snatch away those clinging to Christ's body and blood [the Eucharist]. This persecution is for the examination and evaluation of our heart. God wanted us to be tried and proved, as He has always tried His own, and yet, in His trials, never at any time has His help failed believers." [Saint Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 250), *Letters* 11,5]

³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.

Christ (from the preceding verse in this expanded reading).

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers,

Spirits of different ranks; whether they are good or evil is not clear, but in any case even such beings will not separate Christians from God's love. Saint Paul may be listing such forces that ancient people regarded as hostile to human beings.

"These are all the things which have come upon us since we were abducted by the devil (see Genesis 3:1-24). Paul lists them in order to steel us against them if they should appear so that,

confident of the hope and help of Christ and armed with faith, we might be able to fight against them.” [The Ambrosiaster (ca. A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Romans 8,38]

³⁹ **nor height, nor depth,**

These are probably terms of ancient astrology designating the greatest proximity or remoteness of a star from the zenith, by which its influence was measured. Even such astrological forces cannot separate Christians from this divine love.

nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The love of God manifested in the Christ-event is thus the unshakable basis of Christian life and hope.

“Nothing shall separate the one who believes in truth from the ground of true faith, and it is there that he will come into the possession of enduring, unchanging identity. The man in union with truth knows clearly that all is well with him, even if everyone else thinks that he has gone out of his mind.” [Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita (ca. A. D. 500), *The Divine Names* 7,4]

Gospel - Matthew 14:13-21

Having heard of Jesus’ teaching in parables for the past three weeks, we skip over the beheading of John the Baptist and go to the feeding of the five thousand. The time is now a little over a year into Jesus’ public ministry. According to John 6:4 this is near the Passover time and the next Passover will be the occasion of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Matthew connects this incident (the feeding of the five thousand) with the killing of John the Baptist and the withdrawal of Jesus from Galilee. Mark and Luke associate it with the return of the twelve from their mission and a withdrawal into solitude for rest.

¹³ **When Jesus heard of it [the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.**

The place is not identified (sort of like the mount of transfiguration) but it is near enough to villages to make possible the purchase of food.

The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns.

Again, no identification is given, or necessary, as Jesus has a universal appeal; at least among the people of Galilee.

¹⁴ **When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.**

Jesus' compassion leads to healing, not teaching as in Mark 6:34.

¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ (Jesus) said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves."

Jesus is training His disciples to have confidence, to show initiative, to be leaders.

¹⁷ But they said to him, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have here."

The amount would not even be sufficient for Jesus and the twelve. Because the fish don't fit the Eucharistic overtones, they aren't mentioned again.

¹⁸ Then he said, "Bring them here to me," ¹⁹ and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.

The ritual of the daily Jewish meal, but the formula points forward to the Last Supper. The Greek word for the blessing is *eucharisto*. Note that Jesus uses the disciples as mediators between Himself and the crowds.

²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied,

The crowds are representative of all Israel.

and they picked up the fragments left over -- twelve wicker baskets full.

The twelve baskets and twelve apostles represent all the tribes of Israel. There is enough left over for everyone – all Israel.

²¹ Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.

The total figure could reach twenty or thirty thousand. Since the total Jewish population of Palestine at the time is estimated at half a million, Jesus is presented as feeding one-tenth of the population. The events described here in this gospel account echoes Exodus 16 and Numbers 11 (the narrative of the manna and the quail). There is a doublet of this story in Matthew 15:29 (the feeding of the four thousand) which takes place in Canaan (Gentile territory). In the doublet, seven baskets are left, corresponding to the number of tribes displaced when the Jews occupied the promised land – indicative of enough being left over to feed all the Gentiles.