

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (B)
Saint Odilia 2009

I have a brain-teaser for you. One day a good Christian died and was received by Peter at the Pearly Gates of heaven. Peter opened the book of life and sure enough the name of the Christian was there. "However," said Peter, "before I admit you into heaven, I'd like to show you what hell is like." So Peter took him to hell. Hell was a huge, beautiful banquet hall with many tables heaped high with all the delicacies of the world. Yet the people milling about the tables were grim, unhappy, angry, and thin, emaciated, gaunt. They looked like they hadn't eaten in months. The good Christian looked quizzically at Peter. "We have one rule here," said Peter, "All the food must be eaten with chopsticks, held at the end. The chopsticks are five feet long. They can't get the food into their mouths. Now, I'll show you heaven." But Heaven looked a lot like hell. There was the huge, beautifully decorated banquet hall. There were the tables set with all the delicacies of the nations. But here the people seemed happy, singing and dancing, and well-fed. "We have the same rule here," said Peter. "All the food must be eaten with chopsticks five feet long held at one end." What's the difference between heaven and hell?

Have you ever been hungry? I mean really hungry - so hungry you ate something you would never ordinarily eat? So hungry that you would regard with delight a piece of moldy bread crawling with maggots or a cockroach as a surprising delicacy? I'm not talking about any of the reality shows that reward people for eating disgusting things. I mean hunger so fierce that these things seem desirable, even delectable. Can you imagine what it must be like to be so hungry that you would do anything at all for a mouthful of food? The closest we ever come to hunger is that periodic ritual of starvation known as a diet.

The specter of human hunger in our world is frightening. Many, many years ago, I recalling hearing that Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi, the martyred proponent of non-violence and father of Indian independence, once remarked: "to the millions who have to go without two meals a day, the only

acceptable form in which God dare appear is food."

Perhaps the Gospel writers had something of the same thing in mind when they included the miracle of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish in their Gospels. This is the only miracle that occurs in all the Gospels and twice in Matthew and Mark. It must have had an enormous impact on those very earliest Christians. We heard John's account, the last one written, a few moments ago. For the next three Sunday's we will hear John's reflection on that miracle, about what it means for the identity and mission of Jesus.

That miracle opens the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John's Gospel, and we will hear that entire chapter over the next month. It is considered to be his profound reflection on the mystery of the Eucharist. John says nothing about the Eucharist during the Last Supper where we would expect to find it mentioned. In the other Gospels, Jesus not takes bread and wine, blesses them, and gives them to his disciples and says: Take, eat and drink, this is my body and this is my blood. Not in John's Gospel.

The Gospel readings for the next three Sundays is thought to be his substitute for that scene. The evangelist did not want merely to repeat what the other Gospel writers wrote. His community had read them and that they had already been celebrating the Lord's Supper together for half a century. He wanted to show them what it really meant, what Jesus intended for them to be doing, what Jesus was doing for them in the breaking of the bread. In John's Gospel at the last supper, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.

John begins his instruction today by telling us that Jesus is the one appointed by God as shepherd of his flock. Jesus feeds God's people. Jesus satisfies their hunger. The satisfaction of their physical hunger is a symbol for a much more profound reality, the satisfaction of their hunger for

the Word of God, which Jesus himself is, incarnate, in the flesh.

What does the Eucharist mean for us? Nourished by the Word of God at his table, we become the Body of Christ. Here our hungers are fed. Made members of the Body of Christ we are given that same experience of God that Jesus had. We come face to face with the God who has loved us into life and will love us into eternal life. Here in the Body of Christ we are given an identity and mission, purpose for our lives. By the Eucharist, the food for life, we are empowered ourselves to become the nourishment for the hungers of the human heart. We work together to satisfy physical hungers, certainly. As a parish we are very involved in collecting food for the hungry in our midst, thousands of pounds a year. Surprisingly enough, we find that when we feed others, we ourselves are fed. We are also empowered to become the family where others can feel connected and find acceptance. We become that community where people can find meaning for existence and identity and purpose for their lives. In this miracle of the Eucharist, God has indeed appeared in our world as food. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, we find something strange happening: the food we eat does not become part of us, we become part of it: we become the Body of Christ for the life of the world.

And what did that good Christian discover was the difference between heaven and hell? Anybody got it? Of course, in heaven they fed each other. Go and do likewise.