

On the Capitoline Hill, at the heart of the ruins of imperial Rome stands a fountain of bronzed lions, from the mouths of which, wine was made to flow on high days for the citizens to fill their amphoras for feasting. This speaks to the approach that the world takes towards satisfying the longings in men's hearts. "*Bread and circuses*," the Romans called it – if the people have food and fun they won't cause any trouble. This was how emperors (and many others since them) have sought to satisfy their peoples – but to no avail. Like shipwrecked sailors swallowing seawater to slake their thirst, substitutes serve only to augment their thirst.

This is not the approach taken by the Church, though she is certainly not unconcerned for her flock's material wellbeing. "*The poor*," says the Lord, "*you will always have with you*"; but it remains an enduring scandal for any Christian. The Church does not lack a solid social doctrine – were her social teaching, say, on the "universal destination of goods" better implemented, the world would know considerably less incongruity between its haves and have-nots. Greed and avarice are cardinal sins, certainly to be combatted with virtue: by greater charity and economic solidarity from Christians – if only, St. Peter assures, because charity covers a multitude of sins. But, this is not what this Sunday's readings are all about.

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of Scripture scholars who, in principle, resist any supernatural explanation of events such as we see in the multiplication of the loaves in our Gospel. You will often hear them venture to suggest that the moral of the story is that, if only we would share what each already had, one with the other, there would be sufficient for all. A kind of socialist solution to the question of man's hunger, his poverty and unequal access to resources – God is not needed. This overlooks altogether Christ's outright refusal to permit that His intervention in history be reduced to some sort of secular do-goodery. As the Catholics in Soviet-occupied Poland chanted when their Pope visited in 1878: we need God; we want God! Only His providence satisfies.

These words, taken from our psalm today, form part of the monastic grace that is sung before meals in monasteries: "*The eyes of all look to you, Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.*" Three times a day we must eat, refuel, recharge. What pleasure we can take in eating! But eating is also a mortification, if you think about it. Foraging for our food takes time and money: effort and resources. If we are in a remote place, like the disciples in today's Gospel, it puts us at risk; if we are poor, with the threat of hunger constantly at the door, it makes us extremely vulnerable. If man does not eat, he will die – and the daily reminder of this puts flight to any fantasy he may have that he is invincible. Thanks to this constant cycle of need, man is forced to stop whatever important thing he is doing – three times every day – to forage around for something to prepare, and then digest, in order just to carry on. It was a masterstroke in God's plan, I think; because if human beings, for all their delusions of grandeur, were not forced repeatedly to acknowledge their dependency on something else, on someone else, there would be no end to their pride and vainglory. Imagine if our proud species were to have drawn its energy, like the plants, through photosynthesis – it would have made us insufferable! God has done well, I think, to force man to stop, sit down and fill his mouth, and his belly, with fuel, before he can pick up where he left off and carry on again. It was a necessary limit.

Mealtimes should also be a constant reminder, also, of the solidarity between us, each one of our race: young and old, rich and poor. This is why families should never exchanging facing each other across the dining room table for facing the TV in the living room. It is also the reason why we fast during Lent, on days of penitence and abstain from meat on Fridays – through voluntary

hunger, to grow within us deeper solidarity with those who, involuntarily, suffer hunger every day. Thus should we understand the compassion with which the Lord, in our Gospel, regarded those who were hungry in a lonely place. It also reminds us of our need for God's compassion. You see, those of us who are too well-fed might easily forget that we, too, number among those who hunger for God. If we constantly fill our bellies with food – or drink, or drugs – we mask, however temporarily, that existential hole within us (the lonely place) that is our constant internal reminder that God has made us for Himself, and that our hearts remain restless till they come to rest in Him.

When Jesus leaves the boat, having crossed over to the other shore, He looks with pity on the multitude, for they seemed to Him not so much to be diners without a waiter but rather “*like sheep without a shepherd.*” His first concern is not food and beverages but rather, the ingathering of the flock into communion, made one in Him, their Good Shepherd. The interpretative clue is indicated by the Evangelist, in making pointed reference to the 12 baskets of fragments remaining: signifying, by reference to the 12 Tribes of the People of God, its prefiguring of the Church – by which God's elect are constituted “one tribe, one people” under the leadership of 12 Apostles. It is we, ourselves, then – all of us – who are to yet feed on those fragments remaining. The Evangelist also curiously notes that “*there was much grass in that place*” and that “*He made them to sit down to pasture.*” Christ makes Himself not waiter but pastor to this flock – and His credentials are all the more impeccable – because in Him, God, in first place “sat down” with the hungry: when He took flesh and became man, experiencing in His own human condition all the exigencies of human need. God made Himself hungry for us that we might hunger for Him, our true food. Christ cried from the Cross “*I thirst*” so that our great thirst might see in His thirst for us its only true slaking: that we may “*drink, and be satisfied.*”

All this is to speak of the Eucharist, of course, to which the month of August is specially dedicated. If we take nothing else from this Sunday's Gospel: thus does God provide. The multiplication of loaves serves to prophesy the real feeding of the “whole person” which takes place, in the Eucharist – by which, as St Paul points out in our second reading – we are truly made one. Thus does God provide the only alimentation for which the whole man truly yearns – our “daily bread” – He gives Himself. Thus – and through no other philanthropic substitute or sociological panacea – do we become one flesh, one flock, one body, one hope for unity in the bond of Christ: who is our Peace.

The Incarnation, whereby God partook of our human condition in Christ, the God-made-man: this is the greatest act of solidarity in all human history. God Himself – immovable and serene in His perfections, lacking nothing – chose to draw so near to us, in our hunger for Him, that He became one of us, and subjected Himself to the unthinkable mortification of needing food to survive, even being suckled at the breast of a human mother. It is extraordinary to think of it!

But God comes to man, in Jesus, not simply to eat with him, at the same table – much more: God offers Himself at that table – *Himself* – to be our food. This is the mystery in which we partake every time we come to holy Mass: the mystery of the holy Eucharist. God – Himself – is man's food; nothing less than God, then, can satisfy our hunger.

Do we as Catholics put *our* money where our mouths are and expend as much energy in bringing to this altar all our brothers and sisters whose hunger can find satisfaction only in that true food that assuages every human longing because it is God, Himself, in the most holy Sacrament of the Eucharist? Are we truly believing of this teaching? Man was made for God and nothing less than God can satisfy him.