

Seventeenth Sunday of Year B - God Provides

During the 1970s and 80s it became quite common for people to suggest very ordinary reasons for the extraordinary events that are described in the Gospels. For example the Gospel story today, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, was explained away by suggesting that what had actually happened was that Jesus' request for food to feed the crowd evoked a generous sharing of what each had brought with them, encouraged by the example of the small boy who offered his own five barley loaves and two fish. So the miracle is reduced to a kind of 'pot luck supper' or 'Jacob's Join'.

This is to diminish the wonderful to the banal and there is no justification in the text for such an explanation. That kind of reductionism betokens a lack of faith - and/or an unfamiliarity with how the marvellous often features in the lives of the good, especially when they are responding to the needs of the very poor.

My generation were brought up on tales of the saints and, in all of them, inexplicable wonders were a constant characteristic. We need to hear such stories again today in this age of unbelief. There are many I could recount.

For example in the life of St John Bosco, one of the Patron Saints of Youth, there was the occasion when the supply of bread for the young residents in his hostel ran out at breakfast time. The saint told the boy who had come anxiously with this message to get everyone to look everywhere in the building but only a few rolls could be found. John Bosco then asked them to go to the baker to supply their need but the baker refused because he had still to be paid for his previous delivery!

The saint then gave instructions that whatever had been collected should be put in a basket and God would provide the rest. And he began to distribute to the boys who were formed into a queue. One of many eye witnesses recounted how at the outset there were not more than fifteen or twenty rolls at most to pass on, but Don Bosco continued handing out the contents of the basket until all three hundred boys had been fed, and still there were the same number of rolls left within, undistributed, as there had been at the beginning!

Another time thirty five boys came to him for a spiritual talk and Don Bosco apologised that he had nothing to give them as a reward - but then espied a small paper bag with some nuts in it. He thrust his hand in a gave a handful to the boy nearest to him, and then to the next. All received as many as they could hold in both hands cupped together. Then someone remarked that there were three or four boys absent from the class - and Don Bosco thrust in his hand afresh and drew out generous shares for those who were away. Afterwards those present were at a loss to explain how that had happened. One of them remarked: 'Where he obtained them from is a mystery - the bag he used, I know, must have been quite empty'.

A similar phenomenon occurred in connection with a morning Mass. It was a Feast of Our Lady and about six hundred boys were present. The ciborium in the tabernacle contained only about twenty hosts. The sacristan had prepared another with a sufficiency but had forgotten to put it out for consecration. Only when Don Bosco took the ciborium from the tabernacle and uncovered it did he realise the problem. His expression showed his distress, but he raised his eyes to heaven in silent prayer and then went down to give communion to the boys at the front. But one row succeeded another, until all had communicated - most present did so - and there were still as many particles remaining as there had been at the beginning. The sacristan was baffled. [*Cf. Don Bosco, Lancelot Shepherd, Burns & Oates, 1957 pp 169-71*].

One of many dramatic tales about St John Vianney, the Cure of Ars, is of the time when he was providing for a large number of orphans. There was a drought, and a consequence was that there was only enough flour left to bake three loaves and no more was available locally. When the baker told the Cure of the situation he told her: Go ahead and start making the dough. The baker put a small quantity of dough and water in the kneading trough but the dough remained too thick, and she had to add more and more water. She kept diluting it, and eventually the large kneading trough was full of dough, enough to make ten big loaves of twenty pounds each. When they told the Cure what had happened he simply replied: 'The good God is very good. He takes care of his poor.' [*cf. The Cure of Ars, Abbe Trochu, Burns & Oates, 1955, pp71-72*]

Examples such as this in the lives of the saints are too many to tell, indeed they are beyond numbering. There are similar stories, of course, in the Old Testament - such as that in the first reading today in which the prophet Elisha distributes twenty barley loaves and thereby feeds a hundred people. As the Scripture says: 'He served them; they ate and had some left over'.

Then there is the familiar tale of his predecessor, the prophet Elijah, at a time when the country was beset by famine caused by drought. Elijah was directed by God to ask a poor widow in the town of Zarephah for something to eat. She had only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug but in a truly generous and self-sacrificing spirit she prepared that for him when he promised her that this meagre supply would last until the drought ended. And the story ends: *'And the jar of meal was not spent, nor the jug of oil emptied until the Lord sent rain upon the earth'*.

These remarkable things do happen when there is great need, great faith, and earnest prayer. The Lord can and has supplied.

I have a vivid memory of my first visit to one of the large poor rural villages in East Timor served by the mobile clinic of the Sisters of St Paul of Chartres - which you support through the Peter Trust. The evening before the visit the Sisters had, as usual, been preparing bread rolls with a nutritious filling for the many children who come with their families to the clinic when it arrives in their midst. There were about four or six cardboard cartons full of rolls for this purpose when we left the convent but when we arrived at the village the number of the children was much greater than might normally have been expected - possibly because of the special visitors that were coming that day.

After speeches of welcome and appreciation the trained Sisters began the work of the clinic and the Novices formed the children into queues to each receive their bread roll. I watched as each one came up - and went away with their hands full: bun in one and a mug of soya milk in the other. I was fascinated to see how the rolls kept coming out of the boxes, and the soya milk kept pouring, for as long as the children came up - and in fact there was some of each left over to give to a number of very aged people who had managed to get there. It all looked so natural, and 'more than natural', at the same time. I took photographs.

You do not have to be a canonised saint to witness - or even to do - these things; they are part of our Christian heritage, our experience. They are what can happen, has happened, and does happen, in various situations of need when there is deep faith, generosity of spirit, reliance on God, and small beginnings made trustingly with what is immediately available. Every founder of a religious congregation or society, every missionary, could tell such tales; and those working with them can relate how, over years, Divine Providence supplied many a pressing need.

I could tell you stories about impoverished convent coal bunkers of which the finite amounts continued to be shovelled to feed the fire; or of cans of paint, kindly given to develop a retreat house for youth, that covered more surfaces than the skilled and experienced tradesmen applying them considered possible. But the detail of these must wait for another time!

Today we are invited to renew our faith in God's loving care with the words of the Psalmist: *'You open wide your hand, O Lord, and grant all our desires'*. If this is so often proven to be true with regard to our bodily needs, our physical emptiness, how much more so will it be true of our spiritual hunger, our thirst for justice, for love and peace - of which these miracles are signs.

We should engage as best we can with what we find ourselves to have already, however limited that may seem, and let - indeed **expect** - the Lord to make up what is lacking.

A small boy's lunch can feed a crowd of five thousand. The little we have to give, if we give it, begins the process of meeting the needs of many: we thereby open up the way for God to act in power and satisfy the multitude.