

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Pope Francis has established today as the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, to be observed each year on a Sunday near July 26, the memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, the parents of Mary, and the grandparents of Jesus. In a comforting letter the pope writes, “the Lord continues to send *angels* to console our loneliness.... At times those angels will have the face of our grandchildren, at others, the face of family members, lifelong friends or those we have come to know during these trying times, when we have learned how important hugs and visits are for each of us.... The Lord, however, also sends us messengers through his words, which are always at hand. Let us try to read a page of the Gospel every day, to pray with the psalms, to read the prophets! We will be comforted by the Lord's faithfulness.” Pope Francis sums up the vocation of the elderly this way: “To preserve our roots, to pass on the faith to the young and to care for the little ones.... [T]here is no retirement age from the work of proclaiming the Gospel and handing down traditions to your grandchildren.”

All of us have experienced grace at the hands of the elderly. We have benefitted from their wisdom, rejoiced at their company, and found new life in their embrace. Whenever sickness imperils them, we redouble our prayers, and if they recover, we give thanks to God.

These emotions were surely at play among the crowd in today's gospel, who followed Jesus for one main reason: “they saw the signs he was performing on the sick.” For most of this year we are hearing from the gospel of Mark each week, but for the next five Sundays the church breaks down a single chapter from John's gospel, chapter 6. It begins where we left Mark at the miracle of the loaves, and it unfolds into one of Jesus' most sublime discourses, the one nicknamed “bread of life.”

Perhaps because the large crowd had seen what Jesus could do for the sick, they held no concern about their own hunger. The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle that appears in all four of the gospels, and twice in two of them. These accounts use highly symbolic verbs to describe Jesus' actions. John says he took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them. These resemble the actions the other gospels ascribe to Jesus at the Last Supper: he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it. John alone adds one more detail: these were barley loaves, as in the miracle Elisha worked in today's first reading.

In both miracles fragments remained. In the gospel the disciples pick up the remnants so that nothing is lost. Sadly our society sometimes considers the elderly as remnants, people who have lived passed their usefulness. But each of them deserves our attention, a place inside the basket of our love.

John's message resembles the one Pope Francis gives the elderly: As the word of God is always at hand to console our loneliness, so Jesus Christ is with us always to satisfy our inmost hunger. Sometimes we misread our true hunger; we partake of delights that do not satisfy. Other messengers can show us the way. Our grandparents and the elderly may draw us to Christ, the source of their wisdom and healing. We are grateful for them, for the word of God, and for the Eucharist, for in all these ways Christ the bread of life is always at hand.

Sunday, July 25, 2021