

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Jeremiah 23:1-6 / Mark 6:30-34)

22.07.2018

Eat & Rest

When the apostles come back from their missionary work, we should note that Jesus does not ask them how many people they converted or whether or not the collection was good. He focuses his attention on what is essential: eating and resting. Jesus said to the apostles: “You must come away to some lonely place and rest for a while” because “they had not time even to eat”.

This is quite encouraging for us.

It may be surprising for some to realise that Christianity and discipleship are not just about penance and guilt but also about food and leisure. While it is clear that our Churches have not always been very positive about eating and resting, our so-called developed societies do not seem to fare better in these domains.

Eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia are rife as is starvation. Moreover the fact is that one third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year — approximately 1.3 billion tonnes — gets lost or wasted. This reveals that there is something wrong in the way we relate to the human experience of eating.

To reflect on what we eat, and the way we eat, is to deal with the fundamental question of what it means to be a human being. The philosopher Nietzsche believed that the ‘salvation of humanity’ depended on the question of nutrition much more than upon any piece of theological curiosity.

The way we eat not only distinguishes one human group from another, but meals also reveal how we relate to one another.

Here we must acknowledge that today our meals betray the individualistic trend of our societies. Meals have lost their convivial aspect. Most of our contemporaries eat alone and quickly, their eyes fixed on their iPhone or a TV screen. The fast pace of 21st c. life does not allow us to experience meals as places and times of fellowship and encounter.

What is at stake for us is nothing less than life or death, gluttony or generosity, greediness or hospitality, violence or sharing.

In the Bible, food and eating are not neutral, they constitute an important thread in the tapestry of the relationship between God and humanity. Obviously for us Christians the themes of food and eating lead us to reflect on the way we celebrate the Eucharist.

Whether we think of our social life or of our Sunday gatherings, the challenge is to prevent them both from becoming just individualistic obligations set upon us either by our physical needs or by religious conformity.

If we do not live by bread alone, neither do we live by bread eaten alone.

After eating, there is need for rest. We are not made only for work, for manufacturing and doing, but also for resting and simply being, taking care of who we are.

Rest is made for the recuperation of our body, but it also aims at providing an opportunity for us to feed the mind, for play and to instil gratuity and enjoyment in our human lives which, in this day and age, tend to be obsessed with productivity and efficiency.

The musician knows very well that the pauses in the score are necessary to the rhythm of the music, in the same way we need to stop every so often in order to find our balance and to respect the rhythm of our lives.

At a spiritual level, the call to rest reminds us that we are not in charge of the world. To stop working should help us to realise that, without our work, the world continues to rotate on its own axis and not around us. It may be difficult for us to accept this but the truth is that none of us is so absolutely necessary that we should spend all our time working. When we create an environment where we are indispensable, it becomes clear to all – if it is not to us – that the attempt to be in control of everything is just a disguised way of boosting our self-worth.

To rest is a school of humility; it teaches us to let go. It is a school wherein we learn to depend upon others by allowing them to do something for us. Maybe it was important for the apostles to realise that while they planted the seed, God was responsible for its growth (cf. 1Co 3:6).

At the end of our Gospel reading, we are told that Jesus “set himself to teach the crowd at some length”. We do not know what the exact content of Jesus’ teaching was.

What is sure is that by his life and ministry Jesus showed us what a human being is. He set himself to teach us by word and by deed how we can grow in humanity.

To rest and to eat are part of the process of our humanisation. We may be tempted to be inhuman in the way we deal with our bodies and our time, not respecting them. Obviously the point is not to be complacent or lazy but to live more balanced lives. This would not solve all the problems related to stress, burn-out, depression, and breakdown in relationships but it would certainly help us to deal with them in an easier way.

It is our responsibility to create communities wherein rest and eating are valued, wherein we learn and help one another to respect our human limitations and needs. We have to remember that the Good News of Christ embraces all the aspects of our humanity and that our humanity is called to reflect the beauty and the greatness of the Divinity.