

FR. FRANCIS MAPLE, PANTASAPH FRIARY - HOMILIES

17th Sunday Year B

(Three sermons)

WHEN THE TASK SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE

Jn. 6:1-15

In a T.V. commercial, an announcer asked a woman, "What is the worst four-letter word your child uses. That, of course, brings all kinds of obscenities to mind, but then the woman surprises us with her answer. She asserts that the worst four-letter word her child can use is "can't". Then she cites some, "I can't read. I can't spell. I can't do maths."

"Can't" is one of the worst four-letter words a person can use. The child who says, "I can't do maths," will not be able to do maths so long as that word dominates his thinking. To convince oneself that something is impossible has the practical effect of rendering it impossible. That is true, not only for children but also for you and me. Before we can accomplish any task, we must at least have some hope that it can be done.

That truth is played out in today's Gospel reading. Jesus and His disciples were in a rural place with more than five thousand people. After a while, food became an issue. People began to get hungry. Jesus felt obliged to feed them. He was, after all, the reason they were there. So, He took upon Himself the role of host. It was His job to provide the meal and He tried to share that responsibility with His disciples. He asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these to eat?" Philip was no help at all. In so many words he said, "It's impossible. We might as well give up before we ever start." Andrew did a little better. Somehow, he had found a boy with a small lunch. He told Jesus of his find and then said, "But what good is that little among so many?"

Both of these disciples started with a presumption of despair. They stood before a task that needed to be done and concluded that it was impossible. It was useless even to try because they could not do it. All of us are faced with tasks like that - things that must be done but seem impossible. It may be something as personal as losing weight or overcoming a bad habit. We have tried before and are convinced that we can't do it. Or it may be something social, like ending war or eliminating racism. These evils have always been there and we have little hope of doing anything about them. What are we to do when a task seems impossible?

One thing we might do is realistically face the fact that some things are impossible. For example, we cannot feed a crowd of five thousand with one small lunch, but Jesus can. Our reading leaves room to suppose that He did. But we can't, and no amount of faith will change that reality. The New Testament credits Jesus with doing many things that we can't do. He opened blind eyes. We can't do that. He straightened twisted limbs. We can't do that. He unstopped deaf ears. We can't do that. The word "impossible" is part of our vocabulary for good reason. There are some things we cannot do, no matter how hard we try or how much faith we have.

If it is painful to admit that about ourselves, remember that the same thing was true of Jesus. He wasn't able to do all that He wanted to do. Some things were impossible, even for Him. He could not get along with everybody. Jesus had some enemies who hounded Him to the day of His death. Try as He might, He could not win their friendship. They were determined not to get along with Him. There was nothing He could do about it. He tried to win the trust and loyalty of Judas, but His best efforts were to no avail. Even Jesus had to

deal with failure. Some things seem impossible for the simple reason that they are impossible.

We need to be careful, however, in the application of that idea. Properly used, it is wisdom. Wrongfully used, it can become a lame excuse for laziness. Some things only seem impossible. In reality, they are only waiting to be done. I can remember when space travel was thought to be impossible, but a young Russian cosmonaut named Uri Gagarin proved that idea false. Space travel was just waiting for a pioneer who had the daring to try what others called impossible. In a sense, Jesus was that kind of pioneer.

When the task seemed impossible, He dared to try what others said could never be done. His only resource, so far as we know, was five barley loaves and a couple of fish. Obviously, it was not nearly enough, but it was all He had, so He started with that and it turned out that everyone had enough to eat with twelve baskets left over. The Gospel writer does not explain how that happened. Most people assume that Jesus miraculously multiplied the loaves and fish. That may be what happened. The reading does not say that, but it does leave open the possibility. The main point is that a task that seemed impossible got done. It was not impossible after all.

Could that be true of the challenges we face today? Is peace possible? Can wars cease? We are told it is impossible. Wise voices say that wars are inevitable. They have always been and will always be, but one pioneer, with five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish, might prove that idea to be false. Can races learn to live together in harmony? Of course not, say the cynical doubters. There is a natural antipathy between the races and there always will be, but one little boy, with five barley cakes and a couple of fish, might prove that ancient bit of wisdom to be false.

Some tasks seem impossible because they are, but some tasks seem impossible because no one has had the faith and courage to give it a chance. There are a lot of things in this world that ought to be done, and for a person of faith, to say that a thing ought to be is to say that it can be. Lord Jesus may we be one of those who have the faith and courage to give it a try?

ARE WE CONSCIOUS OF THE STARVING?

Jn. 6:1-15

How many of us have experienced real hunger? We may have been hungry for hours, but not days. When someone is really hungry, hunger rules their world. It forces an honest person to become a thief. It makes the most unselfish person look at his neighbour's plate to see if his ration is bigger than his own. All he thinks of is food, food, food. Severe hunger turns a person into an insomniac. Even when the hungry person does manage to snatch a little sleep, he still dreams of food. If food is given him, he can't keep it down. His stomach rejects it. When you are hungry you will gladly eat grass and chew on an old belt. Fastidious people no longer become fussy, they have even been known in their hunger to eat rats, cats and dogs. Some years ago, a plane crashed in the icy mountains and the survivors were so hungry that they ate parts of the dead bodies that had been preserved in the snow and ice.

In today's Gospel we see how the people followed Jesus to a lonely place. They were so anxious to hear Jesus that they had forgotten to bring food with them. Fortunately, one boy did have some food with him. Jesus multiplied this small quantity and so fed thousands. He gave them the only thing that mattered at that moment, food and plenty of it.

Our problem in our part of the world is not that we have too little food but too much, and too much food is almost as dangerous as too little. How often the main occupation of many

people has become so preoccupied with satisfying their taste buds that this can lead to selfishness, greed and failure to think of those who go hungry.

In our part of the world some of us waste more food than hungry people ever get. This is criminal, for we live in a world where at least a third of our brothers and sisters are hungry. We Christians in Europe should be profoundly disturbed over what is done with our surplus food. On occasions the European Union have mountains of apples, butter, meat, grain and skimmed milk. The stock-piling of surplus food is as great a scandal as the stock-piling of arms. We have a simple answer where to store our surplus food and that is in the shrivelled stomachs of millions of God's children who go to bed hungry at night. But the chances of this happening are remote.

Is there anything we can do to alleviate the hungry of our world? There is. Every Friday we could show some solidarity with them by cutting down on our food, saving say 50p. or £1 and sending it to CAFOD at the end of the year. It would mean that the hungry would benefit by £25 or £50 a year, and if all Christians did this just think what an impact we could have on feeding the hungry.

It is interesting to note that the first matter on which Jesus will judge each person is on the subject of hunger! 'I was hungry and did you feed Me?' We can't multiply food like Jesus did, but we can share what we have, or at least buy it for them through organisations that feed the hungry.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once came across a Hindu family who hadn't eaten for days. She gave them a small quantity of rice. What happened surprised her. They divided the rice in half and gave half of it to a Moslem family next door who also hadn't eaten for days. The Hindu family in their hunger were big enough to look beyond their own need. They threw down the barriers of religion, which sadly so often separate people, and were able to see this Moslem family as their own brothers and sisters in God. 'That' said Mother Teresa, 'takes greatness.'

Lord Jesus, may each one of us hear from You the words, 'I was hungry and you fed Me.'

EACH PERSON MATTERS TO GOD

Jn. 6:1-15

We know very little of the boy that is mentioned in today's Gospel who provided the food for the feeding of the 5,000 people. Was he on his own? Had his mother sent him to the shops to buy the family's meal? Out of curiosity had he got caught up in the crowd? His presence in this event reminds us of something we are prone to forget – the importance of one person.

Many people think they are insignificant. What difference can an individual do in a vast crowd? Others would like to believe that we count for something. We wish we could add some worthwhile contribution to the lives of others. The experience of this young boy speaks to that very human need.

He reminds us first of the uniqueness of the individual. Probably, from all outward appearances, he was much the same as any other boy – dishevelled hair, sandalled and dusty feet. But there was something different about him. He was the only one in that crowd who had brought some food.

There is something distinctive about every person. In some way every one of us is unique. We say of certain individuals, 'When God made him or her, He broke the mold.' The only trouble is that we reserve that expression for notable and famous

people. But I think it is no more true of them than it is of the poor and lowly. When God made you and me, He broke the mould, because there is something distinctive about every individual. Just to take one example ... no one can pray the Our Father or say to God 'I love you' as you can. You have a contribution to make that no one else in all the world can make. This means that if you fail to do it then it will not be done.

This story reminds us of the usefulness of the individual. This boy had very little but what he had he was willing to give. How easy was it for a hungry boy to give up his lunch? Like the rest of the crowd he had walked half way around the Sea of Galilee and he had to walk back. There was no MacDonald's along the way! The natural tendency would have been to hold on to his lunch and say, 'This is mine and I am not going to share it.'

Instead he gave what he had. It was a generous gesture but also a reasonable one. Selfishness is a senseless thing. All that we possess has been given to us. Why should we not share it with others? When God asks you and me to give our talents and possessions to Him, it really isn't an unreasonable request for He is the original Giver. >From where did you get the keenness of mind to be able to go to university or become a business person? God gave it to you. From where did you get a strong body that enables you to get out of bed every morning and work hard all day? God gave it to you.

St. James reminds us in his letter that "every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes down from above." Once we accept this truth, then giving to the cause of Christ ceases to be a sacrifice, it becomes a privilege. We are simply returning to God a portion of the time, talent and possessions that He first gave us.

Once we accept this idea of sharing, we will probably be amazed at what Christ can do with the little we have to give. That young boy could not have believed what he was seeing! All he had was one small lunch but Christ took it, blessed it and used it to feed 5,000 people.

Over the years I have become convinced that many people hold back in their service of Christ and humanity because they feel so inadequate. They take stock of their resources, and it seems there is so little they can give or do. But our responsibility is to give what we have, however small and unworthy it may seem. For those who do that, a happy discovery awaits them. Christ will accept and use it. A little in our hands, is much in Christ's hands.

Let me conclude with a story. On a hot day a man was mowing his front lawn while his seven-year-old son was enjoying himself rolling in the cut grass with his dog. After an hour Dad asked for a drink of water. His son ran into the kitchen, filled a glass with water and ran back. His face was beaming, so proud that he could do something to help his Dad.

The father could see some of the cut grass on his clothing and the dog's hair floating in the glass. But the father could not hurt his son. He drank it to the dregs, grass and dog hairs. If a mere man can feel that way about the imperfect gift from his young son, how much more must God feel that way about us?

Heavenly Father, help us to realise that we all have something we can give to You, in our prayers, works and sufferings of every day. Let us never forget how important we are in Your eyes