



## **SUNDAY MORNING SERMON**

*Georg Steins*

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B: II Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145; Eph 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

Sisters and brothers – on the roads of faith!

As Jews and Christians, women and men alike, we do not simply share fundamental understandings of good and evil or concerning the one God and His relationship with the world; we are also just as united by a small treasury of common gestures and other things which we engage in, above all in the course of our religious services:

- At home and in synagogues and churches we light candles – ever since God proclaimed “Let there be light!” our candles burn all the brighter.
- What a precious possession the Holy Scriptures are for us – which we own jointly and which we – during our happier moments – study together!
- In our daily prayers – morning, afternoon, evening – we “truly suspend time”, as we place our lives in the realm of God’s word.

There is one more gesture, a custom which links people from the worlds of Judaism and Christianity: a custom which is quite inconspicuous, completely routine, almost banal – the breaking and the giving of bread. Indeed, one could even define Jews and Christians as those who break bread.

Ahead of all differences which crop up – and they are painful enough – comes our duty to see what unites us – the gift we receive in this very gesture. It reminds us in two ways of the “one God and caring Father of all” (Eph 4:6).

- God is our Creator – as God’s creations we all wait on God “who gives us our food in due season” (Ps 145:15).
- God has given us the “bread of freedom” so that we can live and serve *God alone*.

The One who divided the waters of chaos, who established the earth as the dwelling place of all living beings, who guided his people through the waters of death to freedom, is not afraid of making the simplest things into symbols of his friendliness.

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During these days we were with Naomi, Ruth and Boaz in “Breadland”: we saw the miracles which took place there, and now we want to share that bread, and break up and go our different ways, newly strengthened for “the long journeys” which lie ahead of us – also in our dialogue (cf. I Kings 19:7).

Scripture shows us the bridge between the lack of bread, loss, being an alien, death – Naomi encompasses all of this in the word “bitterness” (Ruth 1:20) – and the feeling of arriving, being able to live life, “dwelling at the resting place” (cf. Ruth 3:2). This bridge is called the “midway-sign” (cf. Ex 31:13.17). The expression is more accurate, indeed in the true sense of the word more “binding” than the Christian concept of sacrament. “Midway-signs” – because God’s presence becomes tangibly accessible in these and already the world is transformed.

On this Sunday and during this past week, our reading and our thinking revolved and still revolve around bread – more concretely, a particular type of grain: barley. Barley appears as the new, first fruit, the promise of the greater harvest, the first payment, the pledge of fullness during the harvest year. If we look at it more carefully, we see that barley is the symbol in which heaven and earth touch one another and in which the future is reached.

The first text which the lectionary plays into our hand this Sunday is the miracle story of Elisha. A brief text, in which every word seems to be carved. The shortest word in the reading initiates us into the nature of the miracle. It is the Hebrew word “*ten*” – “give!” Elisha has to say it twice to his servant, who is not prepared to believe the prophet the first time round. It’s only when Elisha cites God’s promise that the servant is willing to “give” (this is the literal meaning – unfortunately, our standard German Catholic translation, the *Einheitsübersetzung*, uses the dubious term “*vorsetzen*” which does not have a good sound in German). The prophet says: “For thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and there shall be some left over’” (II Kings 4:43). This means: eat, eat – the extra left over, *my “extra”,* will remain for you nevertheless – in baskets full.

Giving – and giving up: only those who do not have to save and calculate are capable of this. The one who can truly give is the person who knows how to draw from this “extra”, this superabundance, the one who is conscious of being the recipient of overabundant riches. It does not have to be a lot, what we give – but part of the action of giving is the awareness of abundance. This is the heart of the miracle: to take action in harmony with the promise. Giving because there is a God, the God of abundance and blessing. Giving, not for reasons of maintaining distance, not in order to be an example, but because God’s new word is already exemplified: in this word of superabundance which God gives. Jesus, in his prayer of praise and thanks, addresses this God of abundance and blessing: because he himself has “received from his fullness” (John 1:16), he is able to “give” (in John 6:11 there is the same word as in the first reading). In the miracles of Jesus, the abundant generosity of the heavenly Father carves out new routes.

For we ourselves will not only all be full, there will be much still left over – as in the case of Elisha (II Kings 4:44), so in the fields of Boaz (Ruth 2:14) and on the “green meadow” by the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 6:12 – cf. Psalm 23).

It’s as if “an invisible hand” had been at work and had brought our reading material of this week together with the prescribed readings for this particular Sunday. Barley, the barley which is given forth, becomes the link, the midway-sign of our God’s friendly love.

Can one understand the miracle? Probably not, but that’s not the point – what matters is that it happened, and that it continues to happen, that we have experienced it and continue to experience it

- if we – together – hear the words of promise, the words which proclaim to us the kingdom of God,
- if we – in response to the words of the Eternal – break bread and give it with words of praise and exultation.

Thanks be to the “One God and Father of all”, who approaches us with such friendly love, his *chesed*. Amen.