Eighteenth Sunday of the year, cycle B

OSP, 2012 (5:00 p.m.)

Number of events taking place in Chicago in August

**Mind boggling**

As evidenced by difficulty in getting around downtown

Lollapalooza, Bears’ family night,

White sox played angels,

Concerts at Millennium Park,

And then of course there was the storm

In the coming weeks is the **air and water** show

Six more weeks of Chicago-summer dance

Three more weeks of Shakespeare in the parks

And 4 preseason games for the Chicago Bears

There are so many events in the Chicagoland area

That some really critical observances might be overlooked

Like, for example, that starting last week

The Catholic Church began to observe

**Intergalactic bread month**

now this may be a bit of a surprise to you . . .

you didn't read anything about intergalactic bread month

in the bulletin

or in the New World

or even in the Trib

And it may be true that **nobody else** in the galaxy or on earth

Or in the United States much less the Archdiocese of Chicago

may be calling this "intergalactic bread month" except me

But I think it is a **fair assessment** of what lies ahead

Began last week and lasts for 5 Sundays in a row

when for the only time in the 3 year cycle of readings

we hear Gospels taken from the 6th chapter of John

taken from the great discourse on "the bread of life"

In my book that **makes this** intergalactic bread month

or maybe, more accurately, intergalactic bread **of** life month.

And of course liturgists begin to salivate

kickoff event last Sunday ... the great **feeding story** in John

pointedly reminding us ... the face of God is in the poor

Given that amazing start of John 6

This week’s gospel might sound a little **odd**

Or at least more difficult to understand

With the apparent **rebuke of the crowds** by Jesus

And not always crystal clear discussions discussion

of signs and manna - Bread and belief

One posting in the **blogosphere** tried to put gospel in perspective

By comparing it to a TV show that, in all honesty

I have never seen .. but I have seen advertised

The show is A*merica's Got Talent*

Which I think is a knock off from a British original

one blogger calls it an old time talent show on steroids

The contestant who gets "voted through" to the final round

wins a $1,000,000.

and a chance to headline a show in **Las Vegas**

this blogger opines, however, that every week

the show seems to get **bigger and bigger**

brighter and more dangerous

It used to be just jugglers, singers and acrobats

Dancers and dog acts

But the acts that get "**voted through**" seem increasingly

to be those that involve a **risk of injury**

or worse to those performing them

men who get shot out of **cannons**

or muscular acrobatic couples

who **hoist one another** aloft at death defying heights.

During each performance **3 judges** sit at their desks

with control buttons

If at any time during the performance they become **bored**

they push an **X button** and a giant buzzer sounds

testing the mettle and concentration of performer

After each act the judges give feedback.

It's always the **same advice**:

"Up the ante. Make it bigger. Make it better.

Make it more dangerous.

In that framework, the blogger suggests

That what we are getting in the gospel of John

Is sort of a first century **Palestinian version** of this show

Called Jesus’ got talent

For his **first appearance**, last Sunday

He multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed 5,000 people

And though that momentarily **wowed** them

It wasn’t enough for them to **vote him in** as a messiah

And now that their stomachs are growling again

They seek him out for something bigger and better …

They in effect **give Jesus the buzzer**

But here’s where the Jesus’ got talent show

**Deviates** from the current show format

Because even though the crowd seems to be asking

**Let's see** your act again, Jesus.

If it holds our interest, we **won't buzz** you,

and we'll **vote you in** as our messiah

at least until the next round

Jesus will have nothing of it - we experience a **Jesus reversal**

Unlike the regular contests on *America's Got Talent*

Who **never once said to the judges**,

"What are you going to do for me?

This isn't all a one way street.

This isn't just about you sitting here and being entertained

What are you going to bring to the table?"

**Jesus does**

He demands that this "audience" – his judges - **do some work**

To receive the food that will nourish them to eternal life

they need to bring belief to the table.

But there is **no happy ending** here

they are a relentlessly passive crowd

they **just want more** bread and circuses

and so they don’t **vote him into** their lives and hearts

they do not chose to **wager** on belief

for they are **discomforted** by the demands such belief makes

And what are those demands?

What does it mean to put on that **new self**

That Paul talks about in the second reading?

A few weeks ago I mentioned that

One element that comes in for a fair amount of **critique**

In the Roman Catholic liturgy

Is the structure of the **lectionary**

Especially the way the **first reading is selected**

To mirror the gospel

Here’s a Sunday when I wish we would have had

A **different first reading**

For our first reading from the book of Exodus

Is also about **grumbling** **stomachs** and grumbling **believers**

If they had asked me, which they didn’t,

I might have suggested that instead of a reading

About **sour stomachs** from Exodus

We could have read a story about **table hospitality**

Specifically here I am talking about the Story of **Abraham**

In Genesis 18

It is a story that takes place right after Abraham

has been **circumcised**

the weather is **hot** and he is in **pain**

And God comes to visit him

But while God is visiting Abraham 3 nomads appear

And Abraham, **hot, in pain, and with God waiting**

**Runs** towards these guests

And spares no expense in hospitality to them

And God seems **unbothered** by the whole affair

And actually seems to prefer that we attend to strangers

Rather than attend to God

Further, the story seems to communicate

That **hospitality takes precedence** even over

The **spiritual enjoyment of intimacy with God**

For me the **counterpoint** of Abrahamic hospitality

To **Grumbling stomachs** in both the first reading and gospel

Highlights the **cosmic message** of Intergalactic bread month

not first and foremost about **receiving bread**

Even about **receiving communion**

But about **being bread** to others

While it may seem wildly out of season 4th Wiseman?

**The Other Wise Man**

    The short story entitled the Other Wise Man, by Henry Van Dyke from 1896, is the fictional story of a fourth wise man, named Artaban. We pick up his story as Artaban is journeying by horse across the eastern plains, trying to catch up with his three fellow magi who have departed ahead of him, bearing their rich gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.  Artaban is carrying gifts of his own – three precious stones: a ruby, a sapphire and a pearl, which he hopes to present to the Christ child.

Past the ancient walls of Babylon, however, he comes across a ragged man lying on the road, suffering from fever. Artaban considers just moving him off the side of the road, so he can catch up with his companions. Otherwise he would lose his quest. Should he stop following the star to give a cup of cold water to a poor, perishing Hebrew? But he does and saves his life.

In order to catch up with his friends who he discovers have set off across the dessert, he has to sell his sapphire, buy a train of camels and provisions and set off again … but he has learned in the interim that the child was to be born in Bethlehem and not Jerusalem.

By the time he reaches Bthlehem the child and the family have fled to Egypt … and as he takes refuge with a family who has their own boy child, the massacre of innocents takes place in that town before his eyes .. and he surrenders his precious ruby to a soldier who by passes his dwelling announcing there is no boy child there.

After leaving Bethlehem Artaban journeys for 3 decades .. and at the end of his own life finds himself in Jerusalem at Passover.

There he encounters a throng following the last earthly steps of the King of the Jews the one he had sought his whole life. But on the way to Golgotha he counters a young woman who has been seized by soldiers to pay the debt of her father, and is to be sold into slavery. Move with pity, he takes the pearl from the sack around its neck, and gives the last of the treasures kept for the king to ransom the girl.

As darkness filled the sky at that 9th hour, and the temple curtain was torn in two, and the earth shook, a heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the old man on the temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his gray head resting on the young girl's lap, and the blood trickling from the wound. As she bent over him, fearing that he was dead, there came a voice through the twilight, very small and still, like music sounding from a distance, in which the notes are clear but the words are lost. The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one.

    Then the old man's lips began to move, as if in answer, and she heard him say in the Parthian tongue:

    "Not so, my Lord: For when saw I see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty, and gave you drink? When saw I you a stranger, and took you in? Or naked, and clothed you? or in prison, and came unto you? Three-and- thirty years have I looked for you; but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered to you, my King."

    He ceased, and the sweet voice came again.  "As long as you did this for the least of my brothers and sisters you did it for me.” And as Artaban breathed his last, and ended his journey, his treasures were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King.

The Sri Lankan evangelist and hymn writer **D.T. Niles**

is once quoted as saying

Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar

Where he found bread

In some ways we come to Eucharist as beggars

Not some audience with the power to vote Jesus in

As some messiah with talent,

But hoping that he votes us into his kingdom

Something he does in this great gift exchange

called Eucharist

but our past port to God’s reign is not just receiving bread

but being bread for each other

something this Eucharist again fortifies us to do

through Christ our Lord.