

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL

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EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

2nd August 2026

Matt. 14:13 Now when Jesus heard the news of John the Baptist's death, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The multiplication of the loaves is recounted six times in the Gospels: twice in Matthew and Mark and once each in Luke and John. The numbers involved vary for symbolic reasons. It looks as if all six versions go back to an original account circulating within early Christianity. By the time the tradition is received into Mark's Gospel (the first to be written down), it had already taken on a symbolic meaning, illuminated by biblical echoes and informed by the Eucharistic practice of the church. It is impossible to go behind such a highly developed tradition to find out "what really happened". However, some lines of interpretation of a moralising tendency are to be avoided, for instance he persuaded all present to share and this is what "really" happened. That might be of itself a kind of miracle (!) but the Gospel writers do mean something deeper than this in their presentation.

Mark and Matthew, by means of telling the same tradition in two versions, teach their hearers that Jesus is food for both Jews and Gentiles. It is not accidental that the intervening stories (Matt 15) tell of the abolition of the dietary laws of Judaism, the very laws designed to keep Jew and Gentile apart. It is likewise not accidental that these stories are followed by the profession of faith of Peter (Matt 16): only those who see in faith that Jesus is bread for Jews and Gentiles can really confess the true identity of Jesus. This is probably an on-going issue in the early church—critically at the Eucharist.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a miracle story—received in the Gospel tradition as symbolising the deep identity of Jesus and the challenge to practice his inclusivity. The celebration of the Eucharist is precisely a celebration of the Gospel proclamation of the God who loves all without distinction.

Thought for the day

In the Gospels, "compassion" is used in a way which is restricted and instructive. Compassion is used only of Jesus himself or of God in some of the parables. The word itself means something like mercy, arising from deep within, a kind of spontaneous empathy and understanding, the kind of reaction a woman has for the child of her womb. When people are compassionate to us, it is because we need it and usually we are deeply touched and grateful. Such is our God! If we receive such compassion, we are obliged to give it in return, of course. This is the charter of Christian living.

REFLECTION

Reading texts such as those put before us today, it is hard to understand why it is that so many people have a faith which is based on fear, or on an idea of God that is somehow threatening or judgemental. Perhaps it is because we suspect that this is too good to be true, that there must be a catch. We project on to God our conditional, human way of loving and so we can satisfy ourselves as to the limits of God's love. Today's readings are yet another wonderful opportunity for us to take the risk of really hearing what it is that God is saying to us. Jesus reveals the God who is full of compassion, who heals our ills and who nourishes us. Let us put ourselves into his hands once again.

SEAN GOAN - Let the Reader Understand

Verses 13 & 14 tell a story which typifies Jesus' ministry. We can read it from two perspectives:

- a) Jesus as experienced by the people. He was the kind of leader people felt drawn to; they 'go after him' even if they have to 'go on foot' and even when he and his disciples are saddened by bad news and 'withdraw by boat to a lonely place where they can be by themselves'.
- b) Jesus as he is in himself:
 - (i) sensitive so that when he hears a great man has been martyred, he feels the need to withdraw to a lonely place;
 - (ii) selfless so that even in a time of personal distress he finds the resources to reach out to those in need; he lets them bring out the best in himself

The story invites us to celebrate leaders like Jesus. It also calls us to repentance so that we can be more like him, as individuals and as a church.

The story of the feeding of the crowd can be read as a teaching on the Eucharist but it is better to read it in the wider sense, as a general teaching on Jesus' mission to the world. Reading the story in this way reminds us that the Eucharist is itself a living lesson ('sacrament') of Jesus mission - and ours too.

It is significant that the story does not lay emphasis on the miracle itself but on the gestures which precede and follow it - another indication that the miracle of the feeding is a 'sign', a lesson about life that we are called to celebrate and imitate. Being followers of Jesus does not mean having to 'work miracles' as he did. What we are called to do always is to adopt his attitudes, expressed by his gestures in today's story.

MICHEO DE VERTEUIL - Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels

The early Christian sources have preserved the record of a memorable meal with Jesus. The opening dialogue tells us a lot. When they see the people are hungry, the disciples offer the simplest and least demanding solution: let them go into the villages and buy something for themselves. Let each one solve the problem as best they can. Jesus replies by giving the disciples the responsibility: "You give them something to eat"; don't abandon the hungry to their fate.

We must never forget that. When we turn our backs on the world's hungry, we lose our identity as Christians; we are not being faithful to Jesus; his sensitivity and his vision, his compassion, are missing from our eucharistic meals. How can we transform a religion like ours into a movement of more faithful followers of Jesus?

The first thing is to hold on to his fundamental perspective: to let ourselves be affected more and more by the suffering of those who have never experienced a life with bread and dignity. The second is to get involved in small initiatives: specific, modest, partial solutions that can teach us how to share and help us become more identified with Jesus' way of life.

JOSE A PAGOLA- The Way Opened up by Jesus

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The news of the death of John the Baptist prompted Jesus to go off to be alone, but the crowds followed him. Despite his personal sorrow he was able to reach out in compassion to the crowd. Perhaps there have been times when you have put personal preferences and desires to one side in order to reach out to another. What was it like for you when you were able to do this?
2. When Jesus saw the crowd, he recognised their need and responded to them. Who has been a Jesus person for you, someone who recognised your need and reached out to you? For whom have you been a Jesus person?
3. The scene is a Eucharistic symbol reminding us of the sacred meal to which all believers are invited to receive nourishment from the Lord. How has the Eucharist been a source of nourishment for you?
4. When the disciples became aware of the problem, they wanted to send the crowd away, but Jesus told them "You give them something to eat". They thought what they had was insufficient, but Jesus used the little they had to feed the crowd. When we give the little we have to a situation, the results are often beyond our expectations. Have you had this experience?

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