

A Story For Our Time

IN those days the multitude being very great, and having nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples unto him, and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat: and if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far. And his disciples answered him, From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness? And he asked them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven. And he commanded the people to sit down on the ground: and he took the seven loaves, and gave thanks, and brake, and gave to his disciples to set before them; and they did set them before the people. And they had a few small fishes: and he blessed, and commanded to set them also before them. So they did eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets. And they that had eaten were about four thousand: and he sent them away.

Suppose we were to look at today's Gospel as a metaphor of the position that Christ has placed us in today, as His people, in the midst of those who surround us. Let's see where we can go with it.

Jesus *had compassion on the multitude*. They had come out to hear Him. They had been attracted by His teaching, His life, and the miraculous signs He had displayed. But now they were hungry. The inevitable toll of physical appetite, and the need to satisfy it, was making itself felt as a long day was drawing to its close. Not attending to this immediate concern could have resulted in dire consequences, obliging His listeners to depart *fasting to their own houses, fainting by the way: for divers of them came from far*. So anxious had they been to spend time with the Christ who was visiting their region, that no provision had been made for practical matters. No matter how spiritual the endeavor, the very down-to-earth fact of mere survival always reasserts itself.

Upon examination, it was discovered that there were small rations available from within their midst. Someone had been wise enough to carry supplies, anticipating the very crisis that was underway that moment. But there was no possible way that such a paltry amount of bread and fish could go any further than satisfying a very limited number of the attendees, the rest being left to suffer without.

Who is this selfsame crowd when we encounter them within the world that you and I inhabit? What are the *seven loaves* and *few fishes* that they bring with them? And who is the "Jesus" who will meet their need, and the disciples who will serve them? We can apply this story in physical terms, if we choose. Certainly there is hunger around us, and as we pray at mealtimes, "Make us ever mindful of the needs of others." As believers, we hope to find ways to alleviate these wants, both locally, and abroad.

But I want to consider this story as a metaphor for a state of malnutrition of a very different sort. Let's recall those words first spoken by Moses which Jesus Himself later quoted:

Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4: Deut. 8:3).

The multitude that has come to hear, to watch, to listen, to learn, are the collective contacts that each of our lives, when added together, yields. They are first the spouses, the family members, the friends, the acquaintances, then the coworkers, the members of the community, and those with whom we casually interact. Although they are not gathered together for the presentation of a day's instruction, as in today's Gospel, God Himself has arranged them and placed them in our proximity. They have been brought together to witness Christ active in His people, many if not most of them without even realizing it.

Now admittedly, Jesus' auditors were expecting something. They had good reasons. His reputation had long preceded him. First and second hand testimony would have been available everywhere. But what of those whom God has established for our unique contact? We must first settle in our minds that each and all of them are indeed searching for something. It is that "God-shaped vacuum" that Pascal wrote of that most are on a lifelong mission to fill. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you," wrote St. Augustine in his *Confessions*. The fact that this search manifests itself in a fever-pitch of hyperactivity, as is certainly the case now, only reveals how desperately unsatisfactory has been the result of this race for fulfillment. The Enemy of their souls has made sure that there are ready substitutes to provide an illusion of satisfaction, and as soon as one failed, it is snatched out of the way and replaced with another.

The worst possible outcome is disappointment, that the people might be turned away, finding no means of sustenance provided by those who are in a position to offer it. This is Christ's lesson to His disciples, and to us personally. *They need not depart; give ye them to eat*, had been Jesus' sober words to the Twelve in another, very similar situation (Mt. 14:4). If those whose spiritual eyes are fastened upon us for good reason see nothing there, they are in risk of results far worse than physical hunger. They know in whom we believe, the One we follow, and expect, even if they've never formulated the thought in such terms, to receive something that they simply won't find anywhere else. For disappointment can turn to disillusionment, and disillusionment, to despair. This easily proceeds to indifference, and even rebellion. We simply must feed them while we can.

They have brought with them a few loaves and fishes. They still know, in spite of every effort the culture has made to rip them off, a little bit about virtue, beauty, purity, love, holiness, and morality. God be praised! --these are the very riches with which He has filled the arms of His

people! And they are demonstrated in very practical ways, through personal interaction, through normal, everyday contact, through continually making ourselves available to others for this very purpose. This is not a matter of “going out and doing” anything. It is a matter of staying right where we are and doing something with what we have and with whom we find ourselves. It is by a life of prayer, of seeking closeness to Christ through Word and Sacrament, through personal consecration that we become dispensers of holy food. It is the very fruit of the Spirit of God, manifest in and through us, made available to the desperately hungry who surround us.

Christ could have chosen deal with the problem in some other fashion. He could have dismissed the crowd. Doubtless He was fatigued, as were His disciples, whose faith was not up to the task. Perhaps they would have consigned the thousands in attendance to mob the local equivalents of convenience stores, or simply traipse off hungry, the joy and pleasure of three days spent with Christ evaporating into the misery and tension of painfully unmet need. “Out of sight, out of mind,” as the saying goes. But the Lord would not permit it. He used the occasion not only for provision, but for instruction, and so He would do for us.

Perhaps viewing the circumstances of our ordinary lives in such rather extravagant terms appears unreasonable. But when we enter this path of discipleship, we lose ownership of ourselves, and surrender to the purposes and goals of Another. A Christian life lived on any other basis can't be worthy of the name.

So they did eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets. And they that had eaten were about four thousand: and he sent them away. Do you see the satisfaction, the happiness, the fulfillment in their faces, as they walk off into the twilight? Do you see the thrill of His disciples whom He has brought into intimate partnership with Himself in this project? The Christ in whom the crowd yearned to believe has proven Himself. Yes, many were there for superficial reasons. The feast was only another perk brought away from a time of what had been little more than casual entertainment. But for others it clinched their faith. They had indeed partaken of that food which would lead to eternal life. They never need look further. Jesus and His disciples had done their part.

Now we must do ours.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.