

Lent 4

I take as my text today from St. John's Gospel:

And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

I always look forward to the opportunity to address today's Gospel passage from St. John; indeed, not only this passage, but the entire sixth chapter.

When we were confirmed, whether as Anglicans, Roman Catholics, or Eastern Orthodox, we rehearsed the Catechism, if we were children, or the Office of Instruction, if we were adults.

One of the questions asked was ***How many Sacraments hath Christ ordained in his Church.*** As youngsters, the answer with which we responded, drummed into us, and seemingly forever stuck in our memories, is:

Christ hath ordained two Sacraments only, as generally necessary to salvation; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.

Of course, we know that the Church recognizes and accepts seven as the total number of Sacraments: the two greater, and five lesser Sacraments.

The two greater Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are thus the greater as they are the very basic requirements of the Church. This understanding comes from Scripture. These two Sacraments are absolutely essential. One makes us a Christian and the other sustains us as a Christian.

The other five Sacraments are considered lesser as, for instance, not everyone decides that marriage is for them and, certainly, not everyone is admitted to Holy Orders.

The five lesser Sacraments are: **Confirmation, Penance, Holy Order, Holy Matrimony, and Unction.**

Now, as Anglicans, steeped in the tradition of the Church, we are bound to orthodoxy through the Apostolic Succession and the Faith of the Church as defined by the Seven Ecumenical Councils; thus, we do not doubt for even a nanosecond the absolute necessity of Baptism; nor do we doubt the efficacious effect of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

And that brings us to St. John's Gospel account of the feeding of the multitude of five thousand, for in it, we can see not just the story of Jesus performing a simple miracle, but also the unveiling of a mystery to come that is even greater, a prefiguring of something to come.

This becomes more clear when we look not just at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, but also take in the whole of the chapter, for in the discourse that follows the miraculous feeding of the multitude, we see the unfolding of its relationship to the Eucharistic celebration central to our Catholic worship.

To set the stage, it was just before Passover, during the second year of our Lord's ministry: the year 28. John the Baptist had been put to death just a short time before. Jesus, having heard of John's death, had apparently decided to retire from the kingdom of Antipas for a time, until he could be more certain of the situation there; more explicitly, were there any designs directed against him also by Antipas.

In our story, as recounted by St. John, we find Jesus in an area outside the city of Bethsaida, on a hillside by the Sea of Galilee. As He looks up from discoursing with his disciples, he sees a multitude approaching. The estimate given by John is five thousand men. Customarily for that era, the count is given in the number of men, but if we included the women and children, the count would be much, much higher.

The crowd was tired and hungry, presumably many of them travelers making their way to Jerusalem to keep the Passover. Jesus was at the height of his popularity about this time. His preaching and healing of the sick had attracted much attention. Many of the crowd were curiosity seekers. They were hoping to get a glimpse of this "miracle worker" and teacher, thought to be a prophet.

The twelve who were to become his Apostles were present, probably just returning from a mission and making their reports to Jesus.

What follows is probably the most significant of the miracle narratives in the New Testament. It is found in all four of the Gospels. But it is John's narrative, when viewed in the context of Christ's Discourse on the Bread of Life that follows in the same chapter, that brings home to the Christian the true significance of the feeding of the five thousand on that hillside outside Bethsaida some 2000 years ago.

As Jesus looks up and sees the approaching crowd, he turns to Philip and asks him, where can we buy bread to feed these people? Our Lord knew the answer, he knew what he would do, what was available, even before Andrew told him of the five barley loaves and two fishes.

As we gather from the narrative, the question was purely rhetorical, testing Philip, a good businessman, who relied primarily on the concrete, rather than the unseen. Philip's observation was that *seven pounds' worth of bread would not be enough for them*. Seven pounds was a rough estimate of how much it would cost just to give everyone present a little bite or morsel of bread.

And Andrew, who has discovered the five barley loaves and two fishes, is quick to point out the futility of trying to feed so many with such limited resources at hand.

Jesus told the disciples to have the people lie down on the grass. Then, he took the meager resources at hand, and, in a miracle that prefigured the Eucharist Feast, provided a refreshing meal for those thousands present.

I have tried to picture a crowd of five thousand, considerably more, actually, when everyone is added in. That's a lot of people.

Would the miracle have been less significant if there had been fewer people present? In actuality, the number of people is of less significance than what happened on that hillside. Even a tenth of that number would still have been a lot of people to feed on two fishes and five barley loaves.

Even if we were to accept the argument that each person only received a small morsel, with which their hunger was spiritually satisfied, consider then if I were to take a communion host, about an inch in diameter, even a priest's host, which is two and a half inches in diameter, and break it into enough pieces for each person here. Without a miracle, these pieces would be significantly larger than we could imagine those in the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, if there were no miracle.

Whatever explanations Biblical critics have attempted to put forward to explain this miracle recorded in all four Gospels, the obvious cannot be overlooked: this miracle was witnessed not only by the 12 disciples, but also by at least five thousand people, who were so overwhelmed by what they experienced in person, they were ready to seize Jesus and force him to be king. They wanted to proclaim him Messiah. In refusing to accept an earthly kingship, Jesus forfeited his popularity, and began in earnest the road to Calvary.

If we are to better understand the significance of this miracle, we must put it into the full context of the sixth chapter of St. John; that is, we must relate the feeding of the five thousand to John's account of our Lord's Discourse on the Bread of Life. It was in the Discourse on the Bread of Life that Jesus prepared the way for the Institution of the Lord's Supper.

Thus, if we approach the Feeding of the Five Thousand as prefiguring the Eucharist, we can look at our Lord's Discourse and see the sacramental relationship. To quote our Lord from John's Gospel:

I am the living Bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this Bread, he shall live forever; and the Bread that I will give is My Flesh, which I will give for the life of the world

Whoso eateth My Flesh, and drinketh My Blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

For My Flesh is meat indeed, and My Blood is drink indeed.

He that eateth My Flesh, and drinketh My Blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him

The power of this Discourse on the Bread of Life is reflected back to the Feeding of the Five Thousand. When we look at this miracle from the standpoint of a parable, in the perspective of the Discourse that followed, we find that it teaches our Lord's creative power and Lordship over nature; *his benevolence and bounty, giving his people enough and more than enough*; and that *he is the spiritual food of mankind, the Bread of Life, sustaining the souls of those who believe on him*.

Jesus blessed the Bread; then, he sent His agents, the Apostles, as ministers to distribute the bread among the multitude. Jesus did not baptize, nor did he personally distribute the food to the multitude; rather, he used his Apostles as ministers, preparing them for their future role, the Ministry of the Sacraments.

As if he were giving liturgical directions, he instructed the disciples to collect what was left of the bread, emphasizing not only the sacredness of the Eucharistic Bread, but also the concept of economy, a lesson in wastefulness. The disciples collected 12 baskets of the remaining fragments. We may recall the miracle of the wine at the wedding feast in Cana, where there was wine to spare; again, an example of the abundant fullness of life offered by Christ.

Whatever Jesus blesses, when offered entirely without reserve, can be made more abundant in fulfilling his purposes, just as our oblations offered to God in the Eucharist, the bread and wine, surrendered to him, become the Body and Blood of Christ.

After his Discourse on the Bread of Life, many of his disciples and followers left him, and Jesus retired from Galilee with the twelve to prepare for the final tragic denouement to take place in Jerusalem.

In a sense, the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee was the farewell Messianic Banquet of the Galilean Ministry, the true significance of which could not be seen until the Passion and Resurrection had been accomplished.

This feeding of the multitude may be compared to the Last Supper with the Apostles, an earnest of the redeemed fellowship of Christ with his believers in the New Covenant of a Kingdom *not of this world*.

In looking at the feeding of the five thousand in today's Gospel as the prefiguring Messianic Banquet, we can see the extension of that one miracle on the grassy hillside near the sea of Galilee to all nations, all peoples, in the form of the Holy Eucharist instituted with the Last Supper.

As we celebrate the Eucharist, we are joined to the five thousand in Galilee who received a foretaste of the Bread of Heaven; we are joined together with the Angels, Archangels, with all the company of heaven, with the whole Church, the Body of Christ, in offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving, an offering of bread and wine, which God blesses, and returns to us as the Body and Blood of his only Son, the True Bread of Heaven.

Each celebration of the Eucharist is a miracle, a Holy Mystery; and it is truly awe-inspiring that God should invite us to His Holy Table.

It is the most central and sacred act of corporate worship in the Church, inspiring the most dignified ceremonial practices, such as the ringing of bells and the use of incense and tapers, and beautiful vestments and adornments.

Whatever our ceremonial custom in our practice of the Catholic Faith as handed down to us through our Anglican heritage, we accept the miracle of this Holy Mystery; we accept the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the consecrated bread and wine, not quibbling with human terms.

Nor should we forget: God does not feed us with the Bread of Heaven because we are in any way deserving on our own merits; only through his *manifold and great mercies* are we able to approach His Holy Table.

Only through his *manifold and great mercies*.

Granted, we can physically walk up to the Altar, and physically eat the bread and drink the wine; but, spiritually, it's a different story, thus we should take the time to spiritually prepare ourselves to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table....

Indeed, we are not. But isn't that also part of the miracle?

As we approach the Altar, the Holy Table, just like the multitude of five thousand, we, too, are hungry, hungry for spiritual food to nourish our souls. Just as the five thousand were witnesses to a miracle, so too are we witnesses to an awe-inspiring miracle, as we, receiving bread and wine, are fed with the Body and Blood of Christ that through him, we may have eternal life:

I am the bread of life...if any man eat of this bread he shall live forever...