

Mat 14:13-21 – “Turning Outwards”

I think it's the subject of this story, the feeding of the five thousand, that keeps me thinking of the old adage that life is either feast or famine, and how that applies to today's reading. Not in the story itself, where we're dealing with a feast of sorts, but rather in the telling of the story in the gospels. On the one hand we have a famine ... this is a simple, although profound, story, with a fairly simple message (or two!). However, on the other hand we have a feast ... this story is one of the few that are told in all four gospels. Perhaps we could call it not a feast, but a glut, because when you compare the four versions from the four gospels there are more details than can be put together on one plate!

That we have the differing details from all four gospels is not only interesting, it is affirming. If this story was repeated by four different authors, and the details agreed exactly in all four, then I for one would be pretty sure that we had only one account of the incident, copied by all four authors. The disparate details here tell me that the story was related by a number of different witnesses, or at the very least has been retold by different groups, each placing their emphasis in different places.

Where they agree is on the essentials, and that agreement puts a stamp of authenticity on those essentials: a huge crowd was fed, and the food to feed them was provided through a miraculous demonstration of Jesus' power. I take that as a given. I feel neither need nor compulsion to justify this miracle, to try as so many have to find ways to explain how it could be physically possible, to join in the chorus of rationalizations. If I am to believe, as I do with great passion, that there is a God, and that he cares for us, and that Jesus of Nazareth is his son, risen from death as our Lord, then it takes only a trivial leap of faith to believe the miraculous mechanics of providing enough food for thousands out of five loaves and two fishes. That the miracle occurred is for me a non-issue: it did. The real question for me is what else are we called to learn from this incident?

Note that I said, “what else?” You see, if we simply leave this as a miracle story, it leaves us in a totally passive role. Even when we believe the miracle happened, the miracle was an act by Jesus, and that remains no different today. This miracle was performed by the power of God at work in Jesus, not by the disciples, although they certainly had a hand in carrying it out. If all we get from this story is miracles, then all we can do is go home and wait for more miracles, and I don't think that's what we're called to do. There's more to this story, there's more for us to learn, and incorporate into our own faith and our own lives.

The accounts of this incident agree that it occurred early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has just heard about the death of John the Baptist, and withdraws. We're not given the exact reason or reasons that He withdrew into isolation. Was it from a concern that his own life was in similar jeopardy? Did Jesus withdraw away from people to reflect upon and contemplate the impact of John's death was on his own ministry? Or was it simply to grieve? Possibly all of the above. The gospels tell us of the special relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, how they were inexorably linked in the proclamation of the kingdom, and how each recognized the other's role. John's death had to be not only a signal to Jesus that events in his own holy drama were moving forward, but also a moment of profound sadness at a personal level.

But Jesus didn't have the luxury of time alone, to reflect, to think, to grieve, to feel. Even though He had used a boat to find his deserted place, the people still found him. Tromping on foot over the hills, down to the beach, they massed in a great crowd already waiting expectantly for him. I think all of us could understand if Jesus' reaction had been, "oh, no, not here, not now – leave me alone!" But that wasn't his reaction. He had compassion for them. Wading into the midst of the crowd, Jesus listened to their stories, calmed their fears, cured their sick. Speaking to them, talking with them, listening, hearing, caring, touching. In an early example of what his ministry would be like, what he had come to do, even what he represented as God's love in the flesh, Jesus showed compassion for the people who had made the trek to meet him, and even in his own time of stress and grief moved to support these people, to cure their sick, and to uplift them with tales of the kingdom to come.

Oh no, this isn't a story of a miracle that we can watch passively, and wait for Jesus to perform another. This is a story in which we are called to model our lives after Jesus as part of our response in faith. We are called to compassion, to reach out as he did, displaying God's miraculous love in action. Naturally our reactions to being so called to turn outwards range across a wide spectrum. Fortunately in this prototype story, the ways the disciples reacted also reassures us about our own reactions. The four gospel versions of this incident give us a wide range of reactions from those new disciples. They are portrayed from sarcastic dolts in Mark's version through to prescient A+ students, ready to pass Jesus' test in John's version. In Mark's version, the disciples ask Jesus, "are we to go and spend six month's wages for bread? {duh!}" - John's Jesus expects Philip to know what to do, and asks Philip "to test him".

Matthew treats the disciples much more kindly, but they still need a bit of polish in the compassion department – again, that gives us some reassurance that we don't have to be perfect in our responses, we just need to be willing to respond! The disciples' first reaction is to suggest the crowd be sent away to find food – showing compassion, but a bit misguided. The possibility of such a huge crowd being able to find food in neighboring villages when they were in a "deserted place" seems negligible. Unfortunately that kind of compassion shown by the disciples is a bit too familiar to be comfortable, as their suggestion would merely displace the peoples' problems onto some other agency, namely the residents of the surrounding villages.

Pushing the disciples in their faith, Jesus instructs them to give the people something to eat. Can you imagine their confusion, their desperation? "Is this some kind of joke? Is it some kind of test?" they must have been asking themselves, if not each other. "All we have are these bits and pieces", they tell their strange teacher, who not only isn't put off by their response, but takes the food, consecrates it, and instructs them to distribute it, as if it would be sufficient.

And it is sufficient. More than sufficient, with more left over than what they started with. Some people look at church suppers as an example, where it often seems there isn't enough food at the beginning, and more leftovers than can be believed at the end, and perhaps these are tiny examples. It's tempting to think of the example of those coal miners trapped and rescued a few years ago in Pennsylvania, finding a floating lunch bucket with one sandwich and a can of soda pop, and those morsels sustaining the nine of them for three days, and perhaps this too was part of the miracle of their rescue.

But trying to see a re-enactment of the miracle in this story in such ways diminishes not only the power of the miracle itself, but dilutes the message it carries to us in all the gospels. The early church recognized that, and so did the authors of all four gospels, and made sure that the message wasn't lost for successive generation. I'm sure you heard how they did that? I suspect many of you heard the Eucharistic language, echoed even now in our communion services? "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds." Given the variety in the various traditions of this story, and the formal communion language in all the texts to describe Jesus' actions, there is little doubt that this miracle was repeated often in the early church, most likely at communion services. The way in which Jesus consecrated the loaves and fish might not have stood out in the minds and memories of the disciples and the peoples before the Last Supper, but the echoes of his actions certainly came clear for them as Jesus provided the words of institution of his Great Feast at that meal. The meaning was clear, that right from the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus had the power of the Father at work in him, a power of love stirred by deep compassion for the crowds, deep compassion for the weak, the sick, the hungry. A compassion so deep that it is reflected on our "final exam" – "Lord, when did we see you sick, or naked, or hungry, or in prison?" ... "as you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for me."

There's one final little oddity about this story that I think completes it as a prototype. In three of the four versions there is a curious little detail, about the people being instructed to sit down on the grass. None of the stories complete it with the corresponding action, but it's clear that at some point each of them would have to get up off their ... grass ... and carry on. And they obviously did – get off their grass, that is – because the story has been told, and retold, and even recorded that it may be told forever.

The disciples learned to turn outward – not here, not all at once, but gradually they learned that the grace, the power of God at work in Christ was intended to turn them outwards, to help and serve the crowds outside their little group. The crowds learned in turn to turn outward – as congregations grew up and related these stories and celebrated the Sacrament of Holy Communion, breaking bread and giving thanks, they also learned that their call from God was not to huddle in isolation, but to turn outward, and in their turn to feed and comfort the masses outside their own circle. And now it's our turn to learn that same lesson, that we are called by God not to sit in splendid isolation on some remote shore, but to take note of the crowds swelling around us, and to reach out to them with the same love with which God has reached out to us in Christ our Lord. It's our turn to turn outward, to see Jesus moved to compassion, moved to provide comfort, healing, life itself. To hear ourselves being called to that same compassion, following Jesus' commands to bring the message of God's grace to the people through our actions of love, acceptance, support, comfort, food. The power and grace is God's in Christ. The task is ours. The joy is everyone's. Thanks be to God.