

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
August 3, 2014

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If we were Protestants we would give the sermon a catchy little title. “Jesus went away for rest and didn’t get it.” Instead, when Christ and His twelve disciples arrived by boat they found the crowd had not only discovered the location of their retreat but also *got there first!* Anyway, so much for catchy little titles!

Jesus had been preaching to the crowd for days. During that time He reeled off a whole string of memorable parables. Some of these are recorded in the 13th chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel. And these parables show up as well in weekday Mass gospels during this same period. The Son of God was absorbed in spiritual things. But He was never an absent-minded professor! The Lord is always conscious of the physical needs of His hearers. Exhaustion and pain often make us self-centered, irritable, and uncharitable. Not so the gentle Saviour! Christ’s exhaustion only brought Him closer to the fallen human nature He had joined and came to redeem.

So the retreat was put on hold and Christ preached once again. Eventually it was dinner hour, bringing the necessity of providing this crowd with their supper in the wilderness. The disciples looked at the provisions they had packed for their retreat. They had food for thirteen men. What they were about to learn, perhaps for the first time, was without Christ the solution was impossible.

Much is made of this feeding of the 5000 from five loaves and two kippers. All four Gospels make this the central scene in the Lord’s ministry prior to Holy Week. It is, after all, a wonderful prophetic view of the Mass. Motivated by love, Christ organized the distribution and He acted as host while the disciples carried out the Master’s intentions towards His guests in the crowd. That is a description of the Mass. Motivated by love, Christ organizes the distribution and acts as Host while the disciples carry out the Master’s intentions towards His guests. And as in the Mass there is great harmony in this feeding of the 5000.

In the catacombs of Rome you see murals of these fish and loaves and wicker baskets. For the persecuted Church these were the symbols of Christ as “the bread of the World in mercy given.” Fish and loaves and wicker baskets were assurances of the Lord’s love, sympathy, power, and glory for a people who knew they needed

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to be saved. That is, by the way, a good working definition of a Christian: someone who knows he needs to be saved and that only Christ can save him.

In the account of what happened one of the great moments is when the gentle *and playful* Saviour told His Church to feed these people. “*You* give them something to eat.” That is something the Church will be doing daily down to this very day and this very Mass. We will give Christ to His people. *But there had to be a first time.* The feeding of the 5000 was something of a non-sacramental dry run! The disciples again looked on the meal they brought for their retreat and were sure they had little to give. Yet Christ says, “Go on, you do it; *you can do it.*”

The Gospel assertion is this is *exactly what they did!* The disciples shared Christ’s sympathy for the crowd and relied upon His power in obedience to His command. They were sure when Jesus took their small meal into His Own hands the food was multiplied. We are not told that anyone actually *saw* this happen. The actual miracle is understated, just like the changing of water into wine at the Cana wedding feast. Yet when it was all over, and the exhausted Incarnate God had gone to sleep, the disciples themselves were quite unable to sleep. By the light of the campfire they kept staring at twelve wicker baskets *when they were sure they had only brought one!*

Every Christian has a basket of food. It is the grace of God within you, which comes to you by Word and Sacrament through the work of the Holy Spirit. None of this grace is unnecessary. It cannot be spared. But under Christ’s orders grace must be *shared*. Each Christian is called to be God’s agent, waiting upon the Lord’s guests in the wilderness. And as we attend to Christ’s teaching, share His sympathy, and rely upon His power, as did the disciples at the feeding of the 5000, we will also give Our Lord the joy of our lives in harmony with His. By the fullness of our love for Jesus we too will understand the emptiness of souls in the wilderness who do not follow Him. And we will understand their need, which they themselves may not realize, to be fed by Him.