

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2015

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After the apostles' first solo missionary journey, Our Lord Jesus said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile," But He might have had more in mind than just a bit of rest and relaxation. The clue is in the preceding passage. King Herod had beheaded John the Baptist. John was immensely popular with multitudes of people, and so at that moment the political atmosphere was *highly charged*. Suppose a revolt developed and people championed Jesus against Herod. The result would have been a bloody massacre. The Son of God came to save us from our sins, not get us killed at the hands of a nasty tyrant like Herod! So it may have been a very wise move for Jesus and His closest followers to withdraw until the situation cooled.

All of that is interesting conjecture. What matters is what actually happened. What happened is that there was no rest for the weary! Not only did the crowd follow Jesus but *they got there first!* St Mark's Gospel describes Jesus as deeply moved by this leaderless group in such a lonely place. It reminded Him of sheep without a shepherd.

What did Jesus do? "He began to teach them many things." Visualize the scene. Here is the Lord passing among the crowds and dealing eagerly with each in small groups. It *had* to be small groups. There was no public address system! And we may assume there was also no natural amphitheater or stage to project a voice. Jesus moved among small groups to talk, and it took time. It grew late. That is what sets up the great Feeding of the Five Thousand, which is our Gospel next Sunday. What has our attention today is the description of Jesus, tired as He must have been, slowly making His way among all these people, stopping to talk and to teach, until it was very late.

What made these people come to such a remote and lonely place? They were following some sort of intuition or curiosity. They had a suspicion life should be better than what they were living and in one way or another they hoped Jesus had the answer. In a very short time the vast majority of these people would become aware they were not ready for the answers Christ gave them. And they would go away.

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But as Jesus walked among the crowd He recognized “*the meek.*” Those were the souls ready, or getting ready, to turn their lives over to God. Jesus once preached that the wheat was ready for harvest and there were, of course, plenty of weeds growing up with the wheat. In another place He said, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” It was just that way here in this crowd. A few were ready to turn to the Lord, and many were not. And of course that is the situation of the Catholic Church. The Church calls *all* people to repentance and conversion. But we have the Church at all, down to our day, because *the meek have accepted the Lord.* That means the work of Christ continues against the all odds and against every possible obstacle.

Here was a remote and lonely place, with a weary Lord Jesus and His apostles in great need of some rest and relaxation. The conditions were all wrong for the Light of Christ to be kindled in souls that day. *We can take heart that it did happen.* And we can think of the 400,000 or so souls in the Archdiocese of Boston, (out of the 2 million so-called Catholics), who week in and week out still never miss Sunday Mass. That faithful group, not the “cafeteria Catholics” or the disaffected and alienated, is the Church’s constituency with which she can continue to rekindle hope and the hope of holiness and beauty, in a whole sin-darkened society, where Christ is still rejected or dismissed by so many.

In every age of the Church the power and light of Christ are drawn forth and given out to men and women in proportion to their desire and petition for the things of God. On that day long ago Christ “began to teach them many things.” Most of it was beyond the understanding of sin-tainted humanity. *But Christ did it anyway, for all of them,* knowing full well that only a few would respond with their lives. Why should we expect anything different today? In that remote and lonely place a few would be ready for the great revelation Christ next proceeded to proclaim. It is our Mass Gospel next Sunday: He Himself is the Bread of Life, the food of their souls’ salvation.