

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2015

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Jesus said to His Apostles, “Come away and rest awhile.” Many Bostonians are taking that kind of advice this time of year. After a past winter that seems more a terrible nightmare, and the desire to escape the hectic pace of city life, people implement their version of “a lonely place apart.” They may go by boat as Jesus did. Some strap on backpacks and head for the mountains. Others return to a favorite cottage armed with sunblock and reading material. Last Sunday after evensong in Falmouth I was greeted by a West Roxbury neighbor! Clearly this is a part of the gospel that gives pleasure, and it gives advice we take easily.

But because it *is* the Gospel, of course, *something else* is happening as well. All through her long history Israel received much evidence of God’s care. In the wilderness that care included *manna*, the heavenly food provided for the people’s journey. The events in today’s gospel lead up to the feeding of the five thousand. God was once again going to feed His people in the wilderness.

What the apostolic boating party found landing at its designated rest stop was nothing less than the first “Rally for Christ!” Here was the first time a large crowd showed a strong and widely-shared desire to receive something from the Lord. That is the significance of the scene. The feeding of the five thousand was Our Lord’s response to these people. It reminds us of the contribution *mankind itself* makes to the ministry of the Lord. This crowd gave Jesus opportunity to do what Almighty God always does, *resonate to men of good will*.

To escape the August heat one day some years ago we took an excursion out to Little Brewster Island in the outer harbor. While on the island we heard a marine biologist demonstrate how to bring a snail out of its shell. *She hummed at it!* She explained that vibrations stimulate the little critter to leave its shell allowing us to take a peek. So we hummed. And sure enough *out he came!* You can add that tidbit to your general fund of knowledge!

But there is a more important lesson. We have been taught in both Old and New Testaments God is *drawn out* by the sufferings and confusion of His people. The evidence is that it is totally inconsistent with God’s true being that He would ever

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ignore any human plight. He may withhold what we consider the solution. He may allow us to draw a false conclusion He does not care or is not there. But all the objective evidence is God is totally resonant to the human situation. It is as if a sound is picked up in the Divine ear, which causes a sympathetic vibration and response. *And He comes out to us.*

Divine resonance is perfectly sensitive because there is no distortion or limitation to it. Almighty God knows us as we do not (or *prefer* not to) know ourselves. And His response is a perfectly attuned and loving intervention. The good news is that such an intervention is not limited to any abstract description of it, or to the analogy of a snail on a pebble beach. God's intervention in the visible world is Jesus of Nazareth. Our blessed Lord is that divine resonance, and in today's gospel we see this resonance in action. We are told, "He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

The Venerable Bede, "father of English history," always said Jesus was testing this crowd's faith. By seeking a lonely place He wanted to see if they would follow Him. That makes me wonder if I would have taken the trouble. After all, these people didn't know very much about the Lord. But they *did* follow Jesus, and they were concerned to receive whatever Jesus would give them. It was more about that than about any prospects of missing an evening meal or spending a night in the wilderness. And in His welcoming response, Our Lord showed how pleased is our God to feed, heal, and instruct, as a kindly saviour and physician, those who come to Him.